

Common Errors in English by Paul Brians

What is an error in English?

The concept of language errors is a fuzzy one. I'll leave to linguists the technical definitions. Here we're concerned only with deviations from the standard use of English as judged by sophisticated users such as professional writers, editors, teachers, and literate executives and personnel officers. The aim of this site is to help you avoid low grades, lost employment opportunities, lost business, and titters of amusement at the way you write or speak.

But isn't one person's mistake another's standard usage?

Often enough, but if your standard usage causes other people to consider you stupid or ignorant, you may want to consider changing it. You have the right to express yourself in any manner you please, but if you wish to communicate effectively you should use nonstandard English only when you intend to rather than fall into it because you don't know any better.

I'm learning English as a second language. Will this site help me improve my English?

Very likely, though it's really aimed at the most common errors of native speakers. The errors others make in English differ according to the characteristics of their first languages. Speakers of other languages tend to make some specific errors that are uncommon among native speakers, so you may also want to consult sites dealing specifically with English as a second language (see http://www.cln.org/subjects/esl_cur.html and <http://esl.about.com/education/adulted/esl/>). There is also a Help Desk for ESL students at Washington State University at <http://www.wsu.edu/~gordonl/ESL/>. An outstanding book you may want to order is Ann Raimes' Keys for Writers.

Aren't some of these points awfully picky?

This is a relative matter. One person's gaffe is another's peccadillo. Some common complaints about usage strike me as too persnickety, but I'm just covering mistakes in English that happen to bother me. Feel free to create your own page listing your own pet peeves, but I welcome suggestions for additions to these pages.

What gives you the right to say what an error in English is?

I could take the easy way out and say I'm a professor of English and do this sort of thing for a living. True, but my Ph.D. is in comparative literature, not composition or linguistics, and I teach courses in the history of ideas rather than language as such. But I admire good writing and try to encourage it in my students.

Why do you discuss mainly American usage?

Because I'm an American, my students are mostly American, most English-speaking Web users are Americans, and American English is quickly becoming an international standard. I am slowly reworking the site to take note of American deviations from standard British practice. However, the job is complicated by the fact that Canadians, Australians, and many others often follow patterns somewhere between the two. If the standard usage where you are differs from what is described here, tell me about it; and if I think it's important to do so, I'll note that fact. Meanwhile, just assume that this site is primarily about American English.

Isn't it oppressive of immigrants and subjugated minorities to insist on the use of standard English?

Language standards can certainly be used for oppressive purposes, but most speakers and writers of all races and classes want to use language in a way that will impress others. It is interesting that in the debate over Oakland, California's proposed "ebonics" policy, African-American parents were especially outspoken in arguing that to allow students to regard street slang as legitimate in an educational setting was to limit them and worsen their oppressed status. The fact is that the world is full of teachers, employers, and other authorities who may penalize you for your non-standard use of the English language. Feel free to denounce these people if you wish; but if you need their good opinion to get ahead, you'd be wise to learn standard English. Note that I often suggest differing usages as appropriate depending on the setting: spoken vs. written, informal vs. formal; slang is often highly appropriate. In fact, most of the errors discussed on this site are common in the writing of privileged middle-class Americans, and some are characteristic of people with advanced degrees and considerable intellectual attainments. However you come down on this issue, note that the great advantage of an open Web-based educational site like this is that it's voluntary: take what you want and leave the rest.

But you made a mistake yourself!

We all do, from time to time. Drop me a line if you think you've found an error in my own writing. If I think you're right, I'll correct it; but be prepared to be disagreed with. If you write me, please don't call me "Brian." My given name is Paul.

For instructions on how to write me, see the bottom of this page.

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ABJECT

“Abject” is always negative. You can’t experience “abject joy” unless you’re being deliberately paradoxical.

ABOUT

“This isn’t about you.” What a great rebuke! But conservatives sniff at this sort of abstract use of “about,” as in “I’m all about good taste” or “successful truffle-making is about temperature control”; so it’s better to avoid it in very formal English.

ABSORPTION/ABSORPTION

Although it’s “absorbed” and “absorbing” the correct spelling of the noun is “absorption.”<P>

ACCEDE/EXCEED

If you drive too fast, you exceed the speed limit. “Accede” is a much rarer word meaning “give in,” “agree.”

ACCENT MARKS

In what follows “accent mark” will be used in a loose sense to include all diacritical marks that guide pronunciation. Operating systems and programs differ in how they produce accent marks, but it’s worth learning how yours works. Writing them in by hand afterwards looks amateurish.

Words adopted from foreign languages sometimes carry their accent marks with them, as in “fiance” “protege,” and “cliche.” As words become more at home in English, they tend to shed the marks: “Cafe” is often spelled “cafe.” Unfortunately, “resume” seems to be losing its marks one at a time (see under “vita/vitae”).

Many computer users have not learned their systems well enough to understand how to produce the desired accent and often insert an apostrophe (curled) or foot mark (straight) after the accented letter instead: “cafe’.” This is both ugly and incorrect. The same error is commonly seen on storefront signs.

So far we’ve used examples containing acute (right-leaning) accent marks. French and Italian (but not Spanish) words often contain grave (left-leaning accents); in Italian it’s a *caffè*. It is important not to substitute one kind of accent for the other.

The diaeresis over a letter signifies that it is to be pronounced as a separate syllable: “noel” and “naive” are sometimes spelled with a diaeresis, for instance. The umlaut, which looks identical, modifies the sound of a vowel, as in German *Fraeulein*, where the accent mark changes the “ow” sound of *Frau* (woman) to “froy” (girl). Rock groups like “Blue Oyster Cult” scatter umlauts about nonsensically to create an exotic look.

Spanish words not completely assimilated into English like *pinata* and *nino* retain the tilde which tells you that an “N” is to be pronounced with a “Y” sound after it. In English-language publications accent marks are often discarded, but the acute and grave accents are the ones most often retained.

[Note: the accent marks in this entry may not display properly on all operating systems. Consult the page on accent marks to see them properly.]

ACCEPT/EXCEPT

If you offer me Godiva chocolates I will gladly accept them—except for the candied violet ones. Just remember that the “X” in “except” excludes things—they tend to stand out, be different. In contrast, just look at those two cozy “Cs” snuggling up together. Very accepting. And be careful; when typing “except” it often comes out “expect.”

ACCESS/GET ACCESS TO

“Access” is one of many nouns that’s been turned into a verb in recent years. Conservatives object to phrases like “you can access your account online.” Substitute “use,” “reach,” or “get access to” if you want to please them.

ACCESSORY

There’s an “ack” sound at the beginning of this word, though some mispronounce it as if the two “C’s” were to be sounded the same as the two “SS’s.”

ACCIDENTLY/ACCIDENTALLY

You can remember this one by remembering how to spell “accidental.” There are quite a few words like this with -ally suffixes (like “incidentally”) which have to be kept separate from words with -ly suffixes like “independently.” “Incidental” is a word, but “independental” is not.

ACRONYMS AND APOSTROPHES

One unusual modern use of the apostrophe is in plural acronyms, like “ICBM’s” “NGO’s” and “CD’s”. Since this pattern violates the rule that apostrophes are not used before an S indicating a plural, many people object to it. It is also perfectly legitimate to write “CDs,” etc. See also “50’s.” But the use of apostrophes with initialisms like “learn your ABC’s and “mind your P’s and Q’s” is now so universal as to be acceptable in almost any context.

Note that “acronym” was used originally only to label pronounceable abbreviations like “NATO,” but is now generally applied to all sorts of initialisms. Be aware that some people consider this extended definition of “acronym” to be an error.

ACROSSED/ACROSS

The chicken may have crossed the road, but did so by walking across it.

ACTUAL FACT/ACTUALLY

“In actual fact” is an unnecessarily complicated way of saying “actually.”

ADD/AD

“Advertisement” is abbreviated “ad,” not “add.”

ADAPT/ADOPT

You can adopt a child or a custom or a law; in all of these cases you are making the object of the adoption your own, accepting it. If you adapt something, however, you are changing it.

ADMINISTER/MINISTER

You can minister to someone by administering first aid. Note how the “ad” in “administer” resembles “aid” in order to remember the correct form of the latter phrase. “Minister” as a verb always requires “to” following it.

ADULTRY/ADULTERY

“Adultery” is often misspelled “adultry,” as if it were something every adult should try. This spelling error is likely to get you snickered at. The term does not refer to all sorts of illicit sex: at least one of the partners involved has to be married for the relationship to be adulterous.

ADVANCE/ADVANCED

When you hear about something in advance, earlier than other people, you get advance notice or information. “Advanced” means “complex, sophisticated” and doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the revealing of secrets.

ADVERSE/AVERSE

The word “adverse” turns up most frequently in the phrase “adverse circumstances,” meaning difficult circumstances, circumstances which act as an adversary; but people often confuse this word with “averse,” a much rarer word, meaning having a strong feeling against, or aversion toward.

ADVICE/ADVISE

“Advice” is the noun, “advise” the verb. When Ann Landers advises people, she gives them advice.

ADVISER/ADVISOR

“Adviser” and “advisor” are equally fine spellings. There is no distinction between them.

AFFECT/EFFECT

There are four distinct words here. When “affect” is accented on the final syllable (a-FECT), it is a verb meaning “have an influence on”: “The million-dollar donation from the industrialist did not affect my vote against the Clean Air Act.” A much rarer meaning is indicated when the word is accented on the first syllable (AFF-ect), meaning “emotion.” In this case the word is used mostly by psychiatrists and social scientists—people who normally know how to spell it. The real problem arises when people confuse the first spelling with the second: “effect.” This too can be two different words. The more common one is a noun: “When I left the stove on, the effect was that the house was filled with smoke.” When you affect a situation, you have an effect on it. The less common is a verb meaning “to create”: “I’m trying to effect a change in the way we purchase widgets.” No wonder people are confused. Hey, nobody ever said English was logical; just memorize it and get on with your life.

AFFLUENCE/EFFLUENCE

Wealth brings affluence; sewage is effluence.

AGREEANCE/AGREEMENT

When you agree with someone you are in agreement.

AHOLD/HOLD

In formal English you just “get hold” of something or somebody.

AIN’T

“Ain’t” has a long and vital history as a substitute for “isn’t,” “aren’t” and so on. It was originally formed from a contraction of “am not” and is still commonly used in that sense. Even though it has been universally condemned as the classic “mistake” in English, everyone uses it occasionally as part of a joking phrase or to convey a down-to-earth quality. But if you always use it instead of the more “proper” contractions you’re sure to be branded as uneducated.

ALL

Put this word where it belongs in the sentence. In negative statements, don't write "all the pictures didn't show her dimples" when you mean "the pictures didn't all show her dimples."

ALL GOES WELL/AUGURS WELL

Some folks who don't understand the word "augur" (to foretell based on omens), try to make sense of the common phrase "augurs well" by mangling it into "all goes well." "Augurs well" is synonymous with "bodes well."

ALL READY/ALREADY

"All ready" is a phrase meaning "completely prepared," as in "As soon as I put my coat on, I'll be all ready." "Already," however, is an adverb used to describe something that has happened before a certain time, as in "What do you mean you'd rather stay home? I've already got my coat on."

ALLITERATE/ILLITERATE

Pairs of words with the same initial sound alliterate, like "wild and wooly." Those who can't read are illiterate.

ALLS/ALL

"Alls I know is . . ." may result from anticipating the "S" in "is," but the standard expression is "All I know is. . ."

ALLUDE/ELUDE

You can allude (refer) to your daughter's membership in the honor society when boasting about her, but a criminal tries to elude (escape) captivity. There is no such word as "illude."

ALLUDE/REFER

To allude to something is to refer to it indirectly, by suggestion. If you are being direct and unambiguous, you refer to the subject rather than alluding to it.

ALLUSION/ILLUSION

An allusion is a reference, something you allude to: "Her allusion to flowers reminded me that Valentine's Day was coming." In that English paper, don't write "literary illusions" when you mean "allusions." A mirage, hallucination, or a magic trick is an illusion. (Doesn't being fooled just make you ill?)

ALMOST

Like "only," "almost" must come immediately before the word or phrase it modifies: "She almost gave a million dollars to the museum" means something quite different from "She gave almost a million dollars to the museum." Right? So you shouldn't write "there was almost a riotous reaction when the will was read" when you mean is "there was an almost riotous reaction."

ALOT/A LOT

Perhaps this common spelling error began because there does exist in English a word spelled "allot" which is a verb meaning to apportion or grant. The correct form, with "a" and "lot" separated by a space is perhaps not often encountered in print because formal writers usually use other expressions such as "a great deal," "often," etc. If you can't remember the rule, just remind yourself that just as you wouldn't write "alittle" you shouldn't write "alot."

ALRIGHT/ALL RIGHT

The correct form of this phrase has become so rare in the popular press that many readers have probably never noticed that it is actually two words. But if you want to avoid irritating traditionalists you'd better tell them that you feel "all right" rather than "alright."

ALTAR/ALTER

An altar is that platform at the front of a church or in a temple; to alter something is to change it.

ALTERIOR/ULTERIOR

When you have a concealed reason for doing something, it's an ulterior motive.

ALTERNATE/ALTERNATIVE

Although UK authorities disapprove, in U.S. usage, "alternate" is frequently an adjective, substituted for the older "alternative": "an alternate route." "Alternate" can also be a noun; a substitute delegate is, for instance, called an "alternate." But when you're speaking of "every other" as in "our club meets on alternate Tuesdays," you can't substitute "alternative."

ALTOGETHER/ALL TOGETHER

"Altogether" is an adverb meaning "completely," "entirely." For example: "When he first saw the examination questions, he was altogether baffled." "All together," in contrast, is a phrase meaning "in a group." For example: "The wedding guests were gathered all together in the

garden.”

ALUMNUS/ALUMNI

We used to have “alumnus” (male singular), “alumni” (male plural), “alumna” (female singular) and “alumnae” (female plural); but the latter two are now popular only among older female graduates, with the first two terms becoming unisex. However, it is still important to distinguish between one alumnus and a stadium full of alumni. Never say “I am an alumni” if you don’t want to cast discredit on your school. Many avoid the whole problem by resorting to the informal abbreviation “alum.”

AMATURE/AMATEUR

Most of the words we’ve borrowed from the French which have retained their “-eur” endings are pretty sophisticated, like “restaurateur” (notice, no “N”) and “auteur” (in film criticism), but “amateur” attracts amateurish spelling.

AMBIGUOUS/AMBIVALENT

Even though the prefix “ambi-” means “both,” “ambiguous” has come to mean “unclear,” “undefined,” while “ambivalent” means “torn between two opposing feelings or views.” If your attitude cannot be defined into two polarized alternatives, then you’re ambiguous, not ambivalent.

AMBIVALENT/INDIFFERENT

If you feel pulled in two directions about some issue, you’re ambivalent about it; but if you have no particular feelings about it, you’re indifferent.

AMERICAN

Many Canadians and Latin Americans are understandably irritated when U.S. citizens refer to themselves simply as “Americans.” Canadians (and only Canadians) use the term “North American” to include themselves in a two-member group with their neighbor to the south, though geographers usually include Mexico in North America. When addressing an international audience composed largely of people from the Americas, it is wise to consider their sensitivities.

However, it is pointless to try to ban this usage in all contexts. Outside of the Americas, “American” is universally understood to refer to things relating to the U.S. There is no good substitute. Brazilians, Argentineans, and Canadians all have unique terms to refer to themselves. None of them refer routinely to themselves as “Americans” outside of contexts like the “Organization of American States.” Frank Lloyd Wright promoted “Usonian,” but it never caught on. For better or worse, “American” is standard English for “citizen or resident of the United States of America.”

AMONGST/AMONG

Although “amongst” has not dated nearly as badly as “whilst,” it is still less common in standard speech than “among.”

AMORAL/IMMORAL

“Amoral” is a rather technical word meaning “unrelated to morality.” When you mean to denounce someone’s behavior, call it “immoral.”

AMOUNT/NUMBER

This is a vast subject. I will try to limit the number of words I expend on it so as not to use up too great an amount of space. The confusion between the two categories of words relating to amount and number is so pervasive that those of us who still distinguish between them constitute an endangered species; but if you want to avoid our ire, learn the difference. Amount words relate to quantities of things that are measured in bulk; number to things that can be counted.

In the second sentence above, it would have been improper to write “the amount of words” because words are discrete entities which can be counted, or numbered.

Here is a handy chart to distinguish the two categories of words:

amount vs. number quantity vs. number little vs. few less vs. fewer much vs. many

You can eat fewer cookies, but you drink less milk. If you eat too many cookies, people will probably think you’ve had too much dessert. If the thing being measured is being considered in countable units, then use number words. Even a substance which is considered in bulk can also be measured by number of units. For instance, you shouldn’t drink too much wine, but you should also avoid drinking too many glasses of wine. Note that here you are counting glasses. They can be numbered.

The most common mistake of this kind is to refer to an “amount” of people instead of a “number” of people.

Just to confuse things, “more” can be used either way: you can eat more cookies and drink more milk.

AN HISTORIC/A HISTORIC

You should use “an” before a word beginning with an “H” only if the “H” is not pronounced: “an honest effort”; it’s properly “a historic event” though many sophisticated speakers somehow prefer the sound of “an historic,” so that version is not likely to get you into any real trouble.

AND ALSO/AND, ALSO

“And also” is redundant; say just “and” or “also.”

ANGEL/ANGLE

People who want to write about winged beings from Heaven often miscall them “angles.” A triangle has three angles. The Heavenly Host is made of angels. Just remember the adjectival form: “angelic.” If you pronounce it aloud you’ll be reminded that the E comes before the L.

ANY

Instead of saying “he was the worst of any of the dancers,” say “he was the worst of the dancers.”

ANYTIME/ANY TIME

Though it is often compressed into a single word by analogy with “anywhere” and similar words, “any time” is traditionally a two-word phrase.

ANXIOUS/EAGER

Most people use “anxious” interchangeably with “eager,” but its original meaning had to do with worrying, being full of anxiety. Perfectly correct phrases like “anxious to please” obscure the nervous tension implicit in this word and lead people to say less correct things like “I’m anxious for Christmas morning to come so I can open my presents.” Traditionalists frown on anxiety-free anxiousness. Say instead you are eager for or looking forward to a happy event.

ANYMORE/ANY MORE

In the first place, the traditional (though now uncommon) spelling is as two words: “any more” as in “We do not sell bananas any more.” In the second place, it should not be used at the beginning of a sentence as a synonym for “nowadays.” In certain dialects of English it is common to utter phrases like “anymore you have to grow your own if you want really ripe tomatoes,” but this is guaranteed to jolt listeners who aren’t used to it. Even if they can’t quite figure out what’s wrong, they’ll feel that your speech is vaguely clunky and awkward. “Any more” always needs to be used as part of an expression of negation except in questions like “Do you have any more bananas?” Now you won’t make that mistake any more, will you?

ANYWAYS/ANYWAY

“Anyways” at the beginning of a sentence usually indicates that the speaker has resumed a narrative thread: “Anyways, I told Matilda that guy was a lazy bum before she ever married him.” It also occurs at the end of phrases and sentences, meaning “in any case”: “He wasn’t all that good-looking anyways.” A slightly less rustic quality can be imparted to these sentences by substituting the more formal “anyway.” Neither expression is a good idea in formal written English. The two-word phrase “any way” has many legitimate uses, however: “Is there any way to prevent the impending disaster?”

APART/A PART

Paradoxically, the one-word form implies separation while the two-word form implies union. Feuding roommates decide to live apart. Their time together may be a part of their life they will remember with some bitterness.

APOSTROPHES

First let’s all join in a hearty curse of the grammarians who inserted the wretched apostrophe into possessives in the first place. It was all a mistake. Our ancestors used to write “Johns hat” meaning “the hat of John” without the slightest ambiguity. However, some time in the Renaissance certain scholars decided that the simple “s” of possession must have been formed out of a contraction of the more “proper” “John his hat.” Since in English we mark contractions with an apostrophe, they did so, and we were stuck with the stupid “John’s hat.” Their error can be a handy reminder though: if you’re not sure whether a noun ending in “s” should be followed by an apostrophe, ask yourself whether you could plausibly substitute “his” or “her” for the “s.”

The exception to this pattern is personal pronouns indicating possession like “his,” “hers,” and “its.” For more on this point, see “its/it’s.”

Get this straight once and for all: when the “s” is added to a word simply to make it a plural, no apostrophe is used (except in expressions where letters or numerals are treated like words, like “mind your P’s and Q’s” and “learn your ABC’s”).

Apostrophes are also used to indicate omitted letters in real contractions: “do not” becomes “don’t.”

Why can’t we all agree to do away with the wretched apostrophe? Because its two uses—contraction and possession—have people so thoroughly confused that they are always putting in apostrophes where they don’t belong, in simple plurals (“cucumber’s for sale”) and family names when they are referred to collectively (“the Smith’s”).

The practice of putting improper apostrophes in family names on signs in front yards is an endless source of confusion. “The Brown’s” is just plain wrong. (If you wanted to suggest “the residence of the Browns” you would have to write “Browns’,” with the apostrophe after the “S,” which is there to indicate a plural number, not as an indication of possession.) If you simply want to indicate that a family named Brown lives here, the sign out front should read simply “The Browns.” When a name ends in an “S” you need to add an “ES” to make it plural: “the Adameses.”

No apostrophes for simple plural names or names ending in “S,” OK? I get irritated when people address me as “Mr. Brian’s.” What about when plural names are used to indicate possession? “The Browns’ cat” is standard (the second “S” is “understood”), though some prefer “the

Browns’s cat.” The pattern is the same with names ending in “S”: “the Adamses’ cat” or—theoretically—the Adamses’s cat,” though that would be mighty awkward.

It is not uncommon to see the “S” wrongly apostrophized even in verbs, as in the mistaken “He complain’s a lot.”

See also “acronyms and apostrophes.”

APPRAISE/APPRISE

When you estimate the value of something, you appraise it. When you inform people of a situation, you apprise them of it.

APROPOS/APPROPRIATE

“Apropos,” (anglicized from the French phrase “a propos”) means relevant, connected with what has gone before; it should not be used as an all-purpose substitute for “appropriate.” It would be inappropriate, for example, to say “Your tuxedo was perfectly apropos for the opera gala.”

ARTIC/ARCTIC

Although some brand names have incorporated this popular error, remember that the Arctic Circle is an arc. By the way, Ralph Vaughan Williams called his suite drawn from the score of the film “Scott of the Antarctic,” the “Sinfonia Antartica,” but that’s Italian, not English.<P>

AS FAR AS

Originally people used to say things like “As far as music is concerned, I especially love Baroque opera.” Recently they have begun to drop the “is concerned” part of the phrase. Perhaps this shift was influenced by confusion with a similar phrase, “as for.” “As for money, I don’t have any,” is fine; “As far as money, I don’t have any,” is clumsy.

AS FOLLOW/AS FOLLOWS

“My birthday requests are as follows.” This standard phrase doesn’t change number when the items to follow grow from one to many. It’s never correct to say “as follow.”

AS OF YET/YET

“As of yet” is a windy and pretentious substitute for plain old English “yet” or “as yet,” an unjustified extension of the pattern in sentences like “as of Friday the 27th of May.”

AS PER/IN ACCORDANCE WITH

“Enclosed is the shipment of #2 toggle bolts as per your order of June 14” writes the businessman, unaware that not only is the “as” redundant, he is sounding very old-fashioned and pretentious. The meaning is “in accordance with,” or “in response to the request made;” but it is better to avoid these cumbersome substitutes altogether: “Enclosed is the shipment of bolts you ordered June 14.”

ASOCIAL/ANTISOCIAL

Someone who doesn’t enjoy socializing at parties might be described as either “asocial” or “antisocial”; but “asocial” is too mild a term to describe someone who commits an antisocial act like planting a bomb. “Asocial” suggests indifference to or separation from society, whereas “anti-social” more often suggests active hostility toward society.

ASPECT/RESPECT

When used to refer to different elements of or perspectives on a thing or idea these words are closely related, but not interchangeable. It’s “in all respects,” not “in all aspects.” Similarly, one can say “in some respects” but not “in some aspects.” One says “in this respect,” not “in this aspect.” “One looks at all “aspects” of an issue, not at all “respects.”

ASSURE/ENSURE/INSURE

To “assure” a person of something is to make him or her confident of it. According to Associated Press style, to “ensure” that something happens is to make certain that it does, and to “insure” is to issue an insurance policy. Other authorities, however, consider “ensure” and “insure” interchangeable. To please conservatives, make the distinction. However, it is worth noting that in older usage these spellings were not clearly distinguished.

European “life assurance” companies take the position that all policy-holders are mortal and someone will definitely collect, thus assuring heirs of some income. American companies tend to go with “insurance” for coverage of life as well as of fire, theft, etc.

ASTERICK/ASTERISK

Some people not only spell this word without the second S, they say it that way too. It comes from Greek asteriskos: “little star.” Tisk, tisk, remember the “-isk”; “asterick” is icky.

ATM machine/ATM

“ATM” means “Automated Teller Machine,” so if you say “ATM machine” you are really saying “Automated Teller Machine Machine.”

ATHIEST/ATHEIST

An atheist is the opposite of a theist. “Theos” is Greek for “god.” Make sure the “TH” is followed immediately by an “E.”

ATHLETE

Tired of people stereotyping you as a dummy just because you’re a jock? One way to impress them is to pronounce “athlete” properly, with just two syllables, as “ATH-leet” instead of using the common mispronunciation “ATH-uh-leet.”

AUGUR/AUGER

An augur was an ancient Roman prophet, and as a verb the word means “foretell”—“their love augurs well for a successful marriage.” Don’t mix this word up with “auger,” a tool for boring holes. Some people mishear the phrase “augurs well” as “all goes well” and mistakenly use that instead.

AURAL/ORAL

“Aural” has to do with things you hear, “oral” with things you say, or relating to your mouth.

AVOCATION/VOCATION

Your avocation is just your hobby; don’t mix it up with your job: your vocation.

AWHILE/A WHILE

When “awhile” is spelled as a single word, it is an adverb meaning “for a time” (“stay awhile”); but when “while” is the object of a prepositional phrase, like “Lend me your monkey wrench for a while” the “while” must be separated from the “a.” (But if the preposition “for” were lacking in this sentence, “awhile” could be used in this way: “Lend me your monkey wrench awhile.”)

AX/ASK

The dialectical pronunciation of “ask” as “ax” is a sure marker of a substandard education, to be avoided in formal speaking situations.

AXEL/AXLE

The center of a wheel is its axle. An axel is a tricky jump in figure skating named after Axel Paulson.

BACKSLASH/SLASH

This is a slash: /. Because the top of it leans forward, it is sometimes called a “forward slash.”

This is a backslash: \. Notice the way it leans back, distinguishing it from the regular slash.

Slashes are often used to indicate directories and subdirectories in computer systems such as UNIX and in World Wide Web addresses. Unfortunately, many people, assuming “backslash” is some sort of technical term for the regular slash, use the term incorrectly, which risks confusing those who know enough to distinguish between the two but not enough to realize that Web addresses never contain backslashes. Substituting one for the other makes the address inoperable.

BACKWARD/BACKWARDS

As an adverb, either word will do: “put the shirt on backward” or “put the shirt on backwards.” However, as an adjective, only “backward” will do: “a backward glance.” When in doubt, use “backward.”

BARB WIRE, BOB WIRE/BARBED WIRE

In some parts of the country this prickly stuff is commonly called “barb wire” or even “bob wire.” When writing for a general audience, stick with the standard “barbed wire.”

BARE/BEAR

There are actually three words here. The simple one is the big growly creature (unless you prefer the Winnie-the-Pooh type). Hardly anyone past the age of ten gets that one wrong. The problem is the other two. Stevedores bear burdens on their backs and mothers bear children. Both mean “carry” (in the case of mothers, the meaning has been extended from carrying the child during pregnancy to actually giving birth). But strippers bare their bodies—sometimes bare-naked. The confusion between this latter verb and “bear” creates many unintentionally amusing sentences; so if you want to entertain your readers while convincing them that you are a dolt, by all means mix them up. “Bear with me,” the standard expression, is an request for forbearance or patience. “Bare with me” would be an invitation to undress. “Bare” has an adjectival form: “The pioneers stripped the forest bare.”

BASICLY/BASICALLY

There are “-ly” words and “-ally” words, and you basically just have to memorize which is which. But “basically” is very much overused and is often better avoided in favor of such expressions as “essentially,” “fundamentally,” or “at heart.”

BAZAAR/BIZARRE

A “bazaar” is a market where miscellaneous goods are sold. “Bizarre,” in contrast, is an adjective meaning “strange,” “weird.” Let all those As in “bazaar” remind you that this is a Persian word denoting traditional markets.

BEAUROCRACY/BUREAUCRACY

The French bureaucrats from whom we get this word worked at their bureaus (desks, spelled “bureaux” in French) in what came to be known as bureaucracies.

BECKON CALL/BECK AND CALL

This is a fine example of what linguists call “popular etymology.” People don’t understand the origins of a word or expression and make one up based on what seems logical to them. “Beck” is just an old shortened version of “beckon.” If you are at peoples’ beck and call it means they can summon you whenever they want: either by gesture (beck) or speech (call).

FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME

Stephen Hawking writes about the beginning of time, but few other people do. People who write “from the beginning of time” or “since time began” are usually being lazy. Their grasp of history is vague, so they resort to these broad, sweeping phrases. Almost never is this usage literally accurate: people have not fallen in love since time began, for instance, because people arrived relatively late on the scene in the cosmic scheme of things. When I visited Ferrara several years ago I was interested to see that the whole population of the old city seemed to use bicycles for transportation, cars being banned from the central area. I asked how long this had been the custom and was told “We’ve ridden bicycles for centuries.” Since the bicycle was only invented in the 1890s, I strongly doubted this (no, Leonardo da Vinci did not invent the bicycle—he just drew a picture of what one might look like). If you really don’t know the appropriate period from which your subject dates, you could substitute a less silly but still vague phrase such as “for many years,” or “for centuries”; but it’s better simply to avoid historical statements if you don’t know your history.

See “today’s modern society.”

BEGS THE QUESTION

An argument which improperly assumes as true the very point the speaker is trying to argue for is said in formal logic to “beg the question.” Here is an example of a question-begging argument: “This painting is trash because it is obviously worthless.” The speaker is simply asserting the worthlessness of the work, not presenting any evidence to demonstrate that this is in fact the case. Since we never use “begs” with this odd meaning (“to improperly take for granted”) in any other phrase, many people mistakenly suppose the phrase implies something quite different: that the argument demands that a question about it be asked. If you’re not comfortable with formal terms of logic, it’s best to stay away from this phrase, or risk embarrassing yourself.

BEHAVIORS

“Behavior” has always referred to patterns of action, including multiple actions, and did not have separate singular and plural forms until social scientists created them. Unless you are writing in psychology, sociology, anthropology, or a related field, it is better to avoid the use of “behaviors” in your writing.

See also “peoples.”

BEMUSE/AMUSE

When you bemuse someone, you confuse them, and not necessarily in an entertaining way. Don’t confuse this word with “amuse.”

BESIDE/BESIDES

“Besides” can mean “in addition to” as in “besides the puppy chow, Spot scarfed up the filet mignon I was going to serve for dinner.” “Beside,” in contrast, usually means “next to.” “I sat beside Cheryl all evening, but she kept talking to Jerry instead.” Using “beside” for “besides,” won’t usually get you in trouble; but using “besides” when you mean “next to” will.

BETTER

When Chuck says “I better get my research started; the paper’s due tomorrow,” he means “I had better,” abbreviated in speech to “I’d better.” The same pattern is followed for “he’d better,” “she’d better,” and “they’d better.”

BETWEEN

“Between 1939 to 1945” is obviously incorrect to most people—it should be “between 1939 and 1945”—but the error is not so obvious when it is written thus: “between 1939-1949.” In this case, the “between” should be dropped altogether. Also incorrect are expressions like “there were between 15 to 20 people at the party.” This should read “between 15 and 20 people.”

BETWEEN YOU AND I/BETWEEN YOU AND ME

“Between you and me” is preferred in standard English.

See “I/me/myself.”

BEYOND THE PAIL/BEYOND THE PALE

In Medieval Ireland the area around Dublin was within the limit of English law, everything outside being considered as wild, dangerous territory. The boundary was marked by a fence called “the Pale” (compare with “palisade”). The expression “beyond the pale” came to mean “bizarre, beyond proper limits”; but people who don’t understand the phrase often alter the last word to “pail.”

BIAS/BIASED

A person who is influenced by a bias is biased. The expression is not “they’re bias,” but “they’re biased.” Also, many people say someone is “biased toward” something or someone when they mean biased against. To have a bias toward something is to be biased in its favor.

See also “prejudice/prejudiced.”

BIBLE

Whether you are referring to the Jewish Bible (the Torah plus the Prophets and the Writings) or the Protestant Bible (the Jewish Bible plus the New Testament), or the Catholic Bible (which contains everything in the Jewish and Protestant Bibles plus several other books and passages mostly written in Greek in its Old Testament), the word “Bible” must be capitalized. Even when used generically, as in “the Qur’an is the Bible of the Muslims,” the word is usually capitalized. Just remember that it is the title of a book, and book titles are normally capitalized. An oddity in English usage is, however, that “Bible” and the names of the various parts of the Bible are not italicized or placed between quotation marks.

“Biblical” may be capitalized or not, as you choose (or as your editor chooses).

Those who wish to be sensitive to the Jewish authorship of the Jewish Bible may wish to use “Hebrew Bible” and “Christian Scriptures” instead of the traditionally Christian nomenclature: “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” Modern Jewish scholars sometimes use the Hebrew acronym “Tanakh” to refer to their Bible, but this term is not generally understood by others.

BIWEEKLY/SEMIWEEKLY

Technically, a biweekly meeting occurs every two weeks and a semiweekly one occurs twice a week; but so few people get this straight that your club is liable to disintegrate unless you avoid these words in the newsletter and stick with “every other week” or “twice weekly.” The same is true of “bimonthly” and “semimonthly,” though “biennial” and “semi-annual” are less often confused with each other.

BLATANT

The classic meaning of “blatant” is “noisily conspicuous,” but it has long been extended to any objectionable obviousness. A person engaging in blatant behavior is usually behaving in a highly objectionable manner, being brazen. Unfortunately, many people nowadays think that “blatant” simply means “obvious” and use it in a positive sense, as in “Kim wrote a blatantly brilliant paper.” Use “blatant” or “blatantly” only when you think the people you are talking about should be ashamed of themselves.

BONAFIED/BONA FIDE

“Bona fide” is a Latin phrase meaning “in good faith,” most often used to mean “genuine” today. It is often misspelled as if it were the past tense of an imaginary verb: “bonify.”

BORN OUT OF/BORN OF

Write “my love of dance was born of my viewing old Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire movies,” not “born out of.” The latter expression is probably substituted because of confusion with the expression “borne out” as in “my concerns about having another office party were borne out when Mr. Peabody spilled his beer into the fax machine.” The only correct (if antiquated) use of “born out of” is in the phrase “born out of wedlock.”

BORROW/LOAN

In some dialects it is common to substitute “borrow” for “loan” or “lend,” as in “borrow me that hammer of yours, will you, Jeb?” In standard English the person providing an item can loan it; but the person receiving it borrows it.

For “loan” vs. “lend,” see “Non-Errors.”

BOTH/EACH

There are times when it is important to use “each” instead of “both.” Few people will be confused if you say “I gave both of the boys a baseball glove,” meaning “I gave both of the boys baseball gloves” because it is unlikely that two boys would be expected to share one glove; but you risk confusion if you say “I gave both of the boys \$50.” It is possible to construe this sentence as meaning that the boys shared the same \$50 gift. “I gave each of the boys \$50” is clearer.

BOUGHTEN/BOUGHT

“Bought” is the past tense of “buy,” not “boughten.” “Store-bought,” a colloquial expression for “not home-made,” is already not formal English; but it is not improved by being turned into “store-boughten.”

BOURGEOIS

In the original French, a bourgeois was originally merely a free inhabitant of a “bourg,” or town. Through a natural evolution it became the label for members of the property-owning class, then of the middle class. As an adjective it is used with contempt by bohemians and Marxists to label conservatives whose views are not sufficiently revolutionary. The class made up of bourgeois (which is both the singular and the plural form) is the bourgeoisie. Shaky spellers are prone to leave out the “E” from the middle because “eoi” is not a natural combination in English; but these words have remarkably enough retained their French pronunciation: boorzhwah and boorzhwazee. The feminine form, “bourgeoise,” is rarely encountered in English.

BOUYANT/BUOYANT

Buoys are buoyant. In the older pronunciation of “buoy” as “bwoy” this unusual spelling made more sense. Now that the pronunciation has shifted to “boy” we have to keep reminding ourselves that the U comes before the O.

BRAND NAMES

Popular usage frequently converts brand names into generic ones, with the generic name falling into disuse. Few people call gelatin dessert mix anything other than “Jell-O,” which helps to explain why it’s hard to find Nabisco’s Royal Gelatin on the grocery shelves. All facial tissues are “Kleenex” to the masses, all photocopies “Xeroxes.” Such commercial fame is, however, a two-edged sword: sales may be lost as well as gained from such over-familiarity. Few people care whether their “Frisbee” is the genuine Wham-O brand original or an imitation. Some of these terms lack staying power: “Hoover” used to be synonymous with “vacuum cleaner,” and the brand name was even transmuted into a verb: “to Hoover” (these uses are still common in the UK). Most of the time this sort of thing is fairly harmless, but if you are a motel operator offering a different brand of whirlpool bath in your rooms, better not call it a “Jacuzzi.”

BRANG, BRUNG/BROUGHT

In some dialects the past tense of “bring” is “brang” and “brung” is the past participle; but in standard English both are “brought.”

BREACH/BREECH

Substitute a K for the CH in “breach” to remind you that the word has to do with breakage: you can breach (break through) a dam or breach (violate the terms of) a contract. As a noun, a breach is something broken off or open, as in a breach in a military line during combat.

“Breech” however, refers to rear ends, as in “breeches” (slang spelling “britches”). Thus “breech cloth,” “breech birth,” or “breech-loading gun.”

“Once more into the breach, dear friends,” means “let’s fill up the gap in the line of battle,” not “let’s reach into our pants again.”

BREATH/BREATHE

When you need to breathe, you take a breath. “Breathe” is the verb, “breath” the noun.

BRING/TAKE

When you are viewing the movement of something from the point of arrival, use “bring”: “When you come to the potluck, please bring a green salad.” Viewing things from the point of departure, you should use “take”: “When you go to the potluck, take a bottle of wine.”

BUILD OFF OF/BUILD ON

You build “on” your earlier achievements, you don’t build “off of” them.

BUTT NAKED/BUCK NAKED

The standard expression is “buck naked,” and the contemporary “butt naked” is an error that will get you laughed at in some circles. However, it might be just as well if the new form were to triumph. Originally a “buck” was a dandy, a pretentious, overdressed show-off of a man. Condescendingly applied in the U.S. to Native Americans and black slaves, it quickly acquired negative connotations. To the historically aware speaker, “buck naked” conjures up stereotypical images of naked “savages” or—worse—slaves laboring naked on plantations. Consider using the alternative expression “stark naked.”

BY/’BYE/BUY

These are probably confused with each other more often through haste than through actual ignorance, but “by” is the common preposition in phrases like “you should know by now.” It can also have serve a number of other functions, but the main point here is not to confuse “by” with the other two spellings: “’bye” is an abbreviated form of “goodbye” (preferably with an apostrophe before it to indicate the missing syllable), and “buy” is the verb meaning “purchase.” “Buy” can also be a noun, as in “that was a great buy.” The term for the position of a competitor who advances to the next level of a tournament without playing is a “bye.” All others are “by.”

CALL THE QUESTION

This is more a matter of parliamentary procedure than of correct English, but people are generally confused about what “calling the question” means. They often suppose that it means simply “let’s vote!” and some even imagine that it is necessary to call for the question before a vote may be taken. You even see deferential meeting chairs pleading, “Would someone like to call for the question?”

But “calling the question” when done properly should be a rare occurrence. If debate has dragged on longer than you feel is really warranted, you can “call the question,” at which time the chair has to immediately ask those assembled to vote to determine whether or not debate should

be cut off or continue. The motion to call the question is itself not debatable. If two-thirds of those voting agree that the discussion should have died some time ago, they will support the call. Then, and only then, will the vote be taken on the question itself.

Potentially this parliamentary maneuver would be a great way to shut down windy speakers who insist on prolonging a discussion when a clear consensus has already been arrived at; but since so few people understand what it means, it rarely works as intended.

Chairs: when someone “calls the question,” explain what the phrase means and ask if that is what’s intended. Other folks: you’ll get further most of the time just saying “Let’s vote!”

CALLOUS/CALLUSED

Calling someone callous is a way of metaphorically suggesting a lack of feeling similar to that caused by calluses on the skin; but if you are speaking literally of the tough build-up on a person’s hand or feet, the word you need is “callused.”

CALLS FOR/PREDICTS

Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?

Shakespeare: Henry IV, Part 1

Newspeople constantly joke that the weather service is to blame for the weather, so we shouldn’t be surprised when they tell us that the forecast “calls for rain” when what they mean is that it “predicts” rain. Remember, wherever you live, the weather is uncalled for.

CALVARY/CAVALRY

“Calvary,” always capitalized, is the hill on which Jesus was crucified. It means “hill of skulls.” Soldiers mounted on horseback are cavalry.

CANNOT/CAN NOT

These two spellings are largely interchangeable, but by far the most common is “cannot”; and you should probably use it except when you want to be emphatic: “No, you can not wash the dog in the Maytag.”

See also “may/might.”

CANON/CANNON

“Canon” used to be such a rare word that there was no temptation to confuse it with “cannon”: a large piece of artillery. The debate over the literary canon (a list of officially-approved works) and the popularity of Pachelbel’s Canon (an imitative musical form like a round) have changed all that—confusion is rampant. Just remember that the big gun is a “cannon.” All the rest are “canons.”

Note that there are metaphorical uses of “cannon” for objects shaped like large guns, such as a horse’s “cannon bone.”

CAPITAL/CAPITOL

A “capitol” is always a building. Cities and all other uses are spelled with an A in the last syllable. Would it help to remember that Congress with an O meets in the Capitol Building with another O?

CARAMEL/CARMEL

Take Highway 101 south from Monterey to reach the charming seaside town of Carmel, of which Clint Eastwood was formerly mayor. Dissolve sugar in a little water and cook it down until the sugar turns brown to create caramel. A nationwide chain uses the illiterate spelling “Karmelkorn(TM),” which helps to perpetuate the confusion between these two words.

CARAT/CARET/CARROT/KARAT

“Carrots” are those crunchy orange vegetables Bugs Bunny is so fond of, but this spelling gets misused for the less familiar words which are pronounced the same but have very different meanings. Precious stones like diamonds are weighed in carats. The same word is used to express the proportion of pure gold in an alloy, though in this usage it is sometimes spelled “karat” (hence the abbreviation “20K gold”). A caret is a proofreader’s mark showing where something needs to be inserted, shaped like a tiny pitched roof. It looks rather like a French circumflex, but is usually distinct from it on modern computer keyboards. Carets are extensively used in computer programming. Just remember, if you can’t eat it, it’s not a carrot.

CARING

Most people are comfortable referring to “caring parents,” but speaking of a “caring environment” is jargon, not acceptable in formal English. The environment may contain caring people, but it does not itself do the caring.

CATCH-22/CATCH

People familiar with Joseph Heller’s novel are irritated when they see “Catch-22” used to label any simple hitch or problem rather than this sort of circular dilemma: you can’t get published until you have an agent, and you can’t get an agent until you’ve been published. “There’s a catch” will do fine for most other situations.

CD-ROM disk/CD-ROM

“CD-ROM” stands for “compact disc, read-only memory,” so adding another “disc” or “disk” is redundant. The same goes for “DVD” - originally “Digital Video Disc”—even though some manufacturers now claim the initials stand for “Digital Versatile Disc.” Don’t say “give me that DVD disk,” just “give me that DVD.”

CEASAR/CAESAR

Did you know that German “Kaiser” is derived from the Latin “Caesar” and is pronounced a lot more like it than the English version? We’re stuck with our illogical pronunciation, so we have to memorize the correct spelling. (The Russians messed up the pronunciation as thoroughly as the English, with their “Czar.”) Thousands of menus are littered with “Ceasar salads” throughout America—named after Tijuana restaurateur Caesar Cardini, not the emperor (but they both spelled their names the same way). Julius Caesar’s family name was “Julius”; he made the name “Caesar” famous all by himself.

CELIBATE/CHASTE

Believe it or not, you can be celibate without being chaste, and chaste without being celibate. A celibate person is merely unmarried, usually (but not always) because of a vow of celibacy. The traditional assumption is that such a person is not having sex with anyone, which leads many to confuse the word with “chaste,” denoting someone who does not have illicit sex. A woman could have wild sex twice a day with her lawful husband and technically still be chaste, though the word is more often used to imply a general abstemiousness from sex and sexuality. You can always amuse your readers by misspelling the latter word as “chased.”

CELTIC

Because the Boston Celtics basketball team pronounces its name as if it began with an S, Americans are prone to use this pronunciation of the word as it applies to the Bretons, Cornish, Welsh, Irish and Scots; but the dominant pronunciation among sophisticated US speakers is “keltik.” Just remember: “Celts in kilts.”

Interestingly, the Scots themselves often use the “S” pronunciation, notably in referring to the soccer team, “Glasgow Celtic.”

CEMENT/CONCRETE

People in the building trades distinguish cement (the gray powder that comes in bags) from concrete (the combination of cement, water, sand, and gravel which becomes hard enough in your driveway to drive your car on). In contexts where technical precision matters, it’s probably better to speak of a “concrete sidewalk” rather than of a “cement sidewalk.”

CENTER AROUND/CENTER ON, REVOLVE AROUND

Two perfectly good expressions—“center on” and “revolve around”—get conflated in this nonsensical neologism. When a speaker says his address will “center around the topic of” whatever, my interest level plummets.

CENTER OF ATTRACTION/CENTER OF ATTENTION

“Center of attraction” makes perfect sense, but the standard saying is “center of attention.”

CENTS

On a sign displaying a cost of twenty-nine cents for something the price can be written as “.29,” as “\$.29,” or as “29c,” but don’t combine the two forms. “.29c” makes no sense, and “\$.29c” is worse.

CHAI TEA/CHAI

“Chai” is simply the word for “tea” in Hindi and several other Asian languages. Indians almost always brew their tea with lots of milk and spices, and that’s what most people in the West know as “chai.” Since everyone likely to be attracted by the word “chai” already knows it’s a tea-based drink, it’s both redundant and pointless to call the product “chai tea.”

CHAISE LONGUE

When English speakers want to be elegant they commonly resort to French, often mangling it in the process. The entree [acute accent over the second E], the dish served before the plat, usurped the latter’s position as main dish. And how in the world did French “lingerie” (originally meaning linen goods of all sorts, later narrowed to underwear only) pronounced—roughly—“lanzheree” come to be English “lawnzheray”? Quelle horreur! “Chaise longue” (literally “long chair”), pronounced—roughly—“shezz lohng” with a hard G on the end became in English “shayz long.” Many speakers, however, confuse French chaise with English “chase” and French longue with English “lounge” (understandable since the article in question is a sort of couch or lounge), resulting in the mispronunciation “chase lounge.” We may imagine the French as chasing each other around their lounges, but a chaise is just a chair.

CHEMICALS

Markets offering “organic” produce claim it has been raised “without chemicals.” News stories fret about “chemicals in our water supply.” This common error in usage indicates quite clearly the lamentable level of scientific literacy in our population. Everything on earth save a few stray subatomic particles and various kinds of energy (and—if you believe in it—pure spirit) is composed of chemicals. Pure water consists of the chemical dihydrogen oxide. Vitamins and minerals are chemicals. In the broadest sense, even simple elements like nitrogen can be called chemicals. Writers who use this term sloppily contribute to the obfuscation of public debate over such serious issues as pollution and malnutrition.

CHICANO/LATINO/HISPANIC

“Chicano” means “Mexican-American,” and not all the people denoted by this term like it. When speaking of people from various other Spanish-speaking countries, “Chicano” is an error for “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Only “Hispanic” can include people with a Spanish as well as with a Latin American heritage; and only “Latino” could logically include Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, though that is rarely done.

CHUNK/CHUCK

In casual conversation, you may get by with saying “Chuck [throw] me that monkey wrench, will you?” But you will mark yourself as illiterate beyond mere casualness by saying instead “Chunk me that wrench.” This is a fairly common substitution in some dialects of American English.

CHURCH

Catholics routinely refer to their church as the Church, with a capital “C.” This irritates the members of other churches, but is standard usage. When “Church” stands by itself (that is, not as part of a name like “First Methodist Church”) capitalize it only to mean “Roman Catholic Church.”

CITE/SITE/SIGHT

You cite the author in an endnote; you visit a Web site or the site of the crime, and you sight your beloved running toward you in slow motion on the beach (a sight for sore eyes!).

CLEANUP/CLEAN UP

“Cleanup” is usually a noun: “the cleanup of the toxic waste site will cost billions of dollars.” “Clean” is a verb in the phrase “clean up”: “You can go to the mall after you clean up your room.”

CLICHE/CLICHED

One often hears young people say “That movie was so cliché!” “Cliché” is a noun, meaning an overfamiliar phrase or image. A work containing clichés is clichéd.

CLICK/CLIQUE

Students lamenting the division of their schools into snobbish factions often misspell “clique” as “click.” In the original French, “clique” was synonymous with “claque”—an organized group of supporters at a theatrical event who tried to prompt positive audience response by clapping enthusiastically.

CLOSE/CLOTHES

Because the TH in “clothes” is seldom pronounced distinctly, it is often misspelled “close.” Just remember the TH in “clothing,” where it is obvious. Clothes are made of cloth. Rags can also be cloths (without an E).

COARSE/COURSE

“Coarse” is always an adjective meaning “rough, crude.” Unfortunately, this spelling is often mistakenly used for a quite different word, “course,” which can be either a verb or a noun (with several different meanings).

COLOMBIA/COLUMBIA

Although both are named after Columbus, the U.S. capital is the District of Columbia, whereas the South American country is Colombia.

COMMAS

What follows is not a comprehensive guide to the many uses of commas, but a quick tour of the most common errors involving them.

The first thing to note is that the comma often marks a brief pause in the flow of a sentence, and helpfully marks off one phrase from another. If you write “I plan to see Shirley and Fred will go shopping while we visit” your reader is naturally going to think the announced visit will be to both Shirley and Fred until the second half surprises them into realizing that Fred is not involved in this visit at all. A simple comma makes everything clear: “I plan to see Shirley, and Fred will go shopping while we visit.” People who read and write little have trouble with commas if they deal with English primarily as a spoken language, where emphasis and rhythm mark out phrases. It takes a conscious effort to translate the rhythm of a sentence into writing using punctuation.

Not many people other than creative writers have the occasion to write dialogue, but it is surprising how few understand that introductory words and phrases have to be separated from the main body of speech in direct address: “Well, what did you think of that?” “Good evening, Mr. Nightingale.”

Commas often help set off interrupting matter within sentences. The proper term for this sort of word or phrase is “parenthetical.” There are three ways to handle parenthetical matter. For asides sharply interrupting the flow of the sentence (think of your own examples) use parenthesis marks. For many other kinds of fairly strong interjections dashes—if you know how to type them properly—work best. Milder interruptions, like this, are nicely set off with commas. Many writers don’t realize that they are setting off a phrase, so they begin with first comma but omit the second, which should conclude the parenthetical matter. Check for this sort of thing in your proofreading.

A standard use for commas is in separating the items in a series: “cats, dogs, and gerbils.” Authorities differ as to whether that final comma

before the “and” is required. Follow the style recommended by your teacher, editor, or boss when you have to please them; but if you are on your own, I suggest you use the final comma. It often removes ambiguities.

A different kind of series has to do with a string of adjectives modifying a single noun: “He was a tall, strong, handsome, but stupid man.” But when the adjectives modify each other instead of the noun, then no comma is used: “He was wearing a garish bright green tie.” A simple test: if you could logically insert “and” between the adjectives in a series like this, you need commas.

English teachers refer to sentences where clauses requiring some stronger punctuation are instead lightly pasted together with a comma as “comma splices.” Here’s an example: “He brought her a dozen roses, he had forgotten she was allergic to them.” In this sentence the reader needs to be brought up sharply and reoriented mid-sentence with a semicolon; a comma is too weak to do the trick. Here’s a worse example of a comma splice: “It was a beautiful day outside, she remembered just in time to grab the coffee mug.” There is no obvious logical connection between the two parts of this sentence. They don’t belong in the same sentence at all. The comma should be a period, with the rest being turned into a separate sentence.

Some writers insert commas seemingly at random: “The unabridged dictionary, was used mainly to press flowers.” When you’re not certain a comma is required, read your sentence aloud. If it doesn’t seem natural to insert a slight pause or hesitation at the point marked by the comma, it should probably be omitted.

See also “colons/semicolons” and “hyphens & dashes.”

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Hey kids, here’s a chance to catch your English teacher in a redundancy! To compare two things is to note their similarities and their differences. There’s no need to add “and contrast.”

COMPARE TO/COMPARE WITH

These are sometimes interchangeable, but when you are stressing similarities between the items compared, the most common word is “to”: “She compared his home-made wine to toxic waste.” If you are examining both similarities and differences, use “with”: “The teacher compared Steve’s exam with Robert’s to see whether they had cheated.”

COMPLEMENT/COMPLIMENT

Originally these two spellings were used interchangeably, but they have come to be distinguished from each other in modern times. Most of the time the word people intend is “compliment”: nice things said about someone (“She paid me the compliment of admiring the way I shined my shoes.”). “Complement,” much less common, has a number of meanings associated with matching or completing. Complements supplement each other, each adding something the others lack, so we can say that “Alice’s love for entertaining and Mike’s love for washing dishes complement each other.” Remember, if you’re not making nice to someone, the word is “complement.”

COMPLEMENTARY/COMPLIMENTARY

When you pay someone a compliment like “I love what you’ve done with the kitchen!” you’re being complimentary. A free bonus item is also a complimentary gift. But colors that go well with each other are complementary.

COMPRISED OF/COMPOSED OF

Although “comprise” is used primarily to mean “to include,” it is also often stretched to mean “is made up of”—a meaning that some critics object to. The most cautious route is to avoid using “of” after any form of “comprise” and substitute “is composed of” in sentences like this: “Jimmy’s paper on Marxism was composed entirely of sentences copied off the Marx Brothers Home Page.”

COMPTROLLER

Although it is less and less often heard, the traditional pronunciation of “comptroller” is identical with “controller.” The Oxford English Dictionary, indeed, considers “comptroller” to have begun as a misspelling of “controller”—back in the 16th century.

CONCENSUS/CONSENSUS

You might suppose that this word had to do with taking a census of the participants in a discussion, but it doesn’t. It is a good old Latin word that has to do with arriving at a common sense of the meeting, and the fourth letter is an “S.”

CONCERTED EFFORT

One cannot make a “concerted effort” all by one’s self. To work “in concert” is to work together with others. The prefix “con-” means “with.”

CONFLICTED/CONFLICTING FEELINGS

Phrases like “conflicted feelings” or “I feel conflicted” are considered jargon by many, and out of place in formal writing. Use “I have conflicting feelings” instead, or write “I feel ambivalent.”

CONFUSIONISM/CONFUCIANISM

This spelling error isn’t exactly an English error, but it’s very common among my students. Confucius is the founder of Confucianism. His name is not spelled “Confucious,” and his philosophy is not called “Confusionism.” When you spot the confusion in the latter term, change it quickly to “Confucianism.”

CONGRADULATIONS/CONGRATULATIONS

I fear that all too many people are being “congradulated” for graduating from high school who don’t know that this word should be spelled “congratulations.” Try a search for this misspelling on your favorite Web search engine and be prepared to be astonished.

CONTACT

Although some still object to “contact” as a verb, sentences like “contact me when the budget is ready” are now standard English.

CONTINUAL/CONTINUOUS

“Continuous” refers to actions which are uninterrupted: “My upstairs neighbor played his stereo continuously from 6:00 PM to 3:30 AM.” Continual actions, however, need not be uninterrupted, only repeated: “My father continually urges me to get a job.”

CONVERSATE/CONVERSE

“Conversate” is what is called a “back-formation” based on the noun “conversation.” But the verb for this sort of thing is “converse.”

CORE/CORPS/CORPSE

Apples have cores. A corps is an organization, like the Peace Corps. A corpse is a dead body, a carcass.

COLLABORATE/CORROBORATE

People who work together on a project “collaborate” (share their labor); people who support your testimony as a witness “corroborate” (strengthen by confirming) it.

COLONS/SEMICOLONS

Colons have a host of uses, but they mostly have in common that the colon acts to connect what precedes it with what follows. Think of the two dots of a colon as if they were stretched out to form an equal sign, so that you get cases like this: “he provided all the ingredients: sugar, flour, butter, and vanilla.”

There are a few exceptions to this pattern, however. One unusual use of colons is in between the chapter and verses of a Biblical citation, for instance, “Matthew 6:5.” In bibliographic citation a colon separates the city from the publisher: “New York: New Directions, 1979.” It also separates minutes from hours in times of day when given in figures: “8:35.” It is incorrect to substitute a semicolon in any of these cases.

Think of the semicolon as erecting a little barrier with that dug-in comma under the dot; semicolons always imply separation rather than connection. A sentence made up of two distinct parts whose separation needs to be emphasized may do so with a semicolon: “Mary moved to Seattle; she was sick of getting sunburned in Los Angeles.” When a compound sentence contains commas within one or more of its clauses, you have to escalate to a semicolon to separate the clauses themselves: “It was a mild, deliciously warm spring day; and Mary decided to walk to the fair.” The other main use of semicolons is to separate one series of items from another—a series within a series, if you will: “The issues discussed by the board of directors were many: the loud, acrimonious complaints of the stockholders; the abrupt, devastating departure of the director; and the startling, humiliating discovery that he had absconded with half the company’s assets.” Any time the phrases which make up a series contain commas, for whatever reason, they need to be separated by semicolons.

Many people are so terrified of making the wrong choice that they try to avoid colons and semicolons altogether, but I’m afraid this just can’t be done. Formal writing requires their use, and it’s necessary to learn the correct patterns.

CONTRASTS/CONTRASTS WITH

“With” must not be omitted in sentences like this: “Julia’s enthusiasm for rugby contrasts with Cheryl’s devotion to chess.”

COULD CARE LESS/COULDN’T CARE LESS

Cliches are especially prone to scrambling because they become meaningless through overuse. In this case an expression which originally meant “it would be impossible for me to care less than I do because I do not care at all” is rendered senseless by being transformed into the now-common “I could care less.” Think about it: if you could care less, that means you care some. The original already drips sarcasm, so it’s pointless to argue that the newer version is “ironic.” People who misuse this phrase are just being careless.

COULD OF, SHOULD OF, WOULD OF/COULD HAVE, SHOULD HAVE, WOULD HAVE

This is one of those errors typically made by a person more familiar with the spoken than the written form of English. A sentence like “I would have gone if anyone had given me free tickets” is normally spoken in a slurred way so that the two words “would have” are not distinctly separated, but blended together into what is properly rendered “would’ve.” Seeing that “V” tips you off right away that “would’ve” is a contraction of “would have.” But many people hear “would of” and that’s how they write it. Wrong.

Note that “must of” is similarly an error for “must have.”

COUNCIL/COUNSEL/CONSUL

The first two words are pronounced the same but have distinct meanings. An official group which deliberates, like the Council on Foreign Relations, is a “council”; all the rest are “counsels”: your lawyer, advice, etc. A consul is a local representative of a foreign government.

COUPLE/COUPLE OF

Instead of “she went with a couple sleazy guys before she met me,” write “a couple of guys” if you are trying to sound a bit more formal. Leaving the “of” out is a casual, slangy pattern.

CREDIBLE/CREDULOUS

“Credible” means “believable” or “trustworthy.” It is also used in a more abstract sense, meaning something like “worthy”: “She made a credible lyric soprano.” Don’t confuse “credible” with “credulous,” a much rarer word which means “gullible.” “He was incredulous” means “he didn’t believe it” whereas “he was incredible” means “he was wonderful” (but use the latter expression only in casual speech).

See also “incredible.”

CRESCENDO/CLIMAX

When something is growing louder or more intense, it is going through a crescendo (from an Italian word meaning “growing”). Traditionalists object to its use when you mean “climax.” A crescendo of cheers by an enthusiastic audience grows until it reaches a climax, or peak. “Crescendo” as a verb is common, but also disapproved by many authorities. Instead of “the orchestra crescendos,” write “the orchestra plays a crescendo.”

CRITERIA/CRITERION

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, data and media. You can have one criterion or many criteria. Don’t confuse them.

CRITICISM

Beginning literature or art history students are often surprised to learn that in such contexts “criticism” can be a neutral term meaning simply “writing evaluating a work of literature or art.” A critical article about *The Color Purple* can be entirely positive about Alice Walker’s novel. Movie critics write about films they like as well as about films they dislike: writing of both kinds is called “criticism.”

CRITIQUE/CRITICIZE

A critique is a detailed evaluation of something. The formal way to request one is “give me your critique,” though people often say informally “critique this”—meaning “evaluate it thoroughly.” But “critique” as a verb is not synonymous with “criticize” and should not be routinely substituted for it. “Josh critiqued my backhand” means Josh evaluated your tennis technique but not necessarily that he found it lacking. “Josh criticized my backhand” means that he had a low opinion of it.

You can write criticism on a subject, but you don’t criticize on something, you just criticize it.

CRUCIFIXION/CRUCIFIXION

One might suppose that this common misspelling was a product of skepticism were it not for the fact that it most often occurs in the writings of believers. The word should make clear that Jesus was affixed to the cross, not imply that his killing is regarded as a fiction.

CURRENT/CURRENT

“Current” is an adjective having to do with the present time, and can also be a noun naming a thing that, like time, flows: electrical current, currents of public opinion. “Currant” refers only to little fruits.

CUT AND DRY/CUT AND DRIED

Many people mishear the standard expression meaning “routine” as “cut and dry.” Although this form is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, it is definitely less common in sophisticated writing. The dominant modern usage is “cut and dried.” When used to modify a noun, it must be hyphenated: “cut-and-dried plan.”

CUT AND PASTE/COPY AND PASTE

Because “cut and paste” is a familiar phrase, many people say it when they mean “copy and paste” in a computer context. This can lead to disastrous results if followed literally by an inexperienced person. If you mean to tell someone to duplicate something rather than move it, say “copy.” And when you are moving bits of computer information from one place to another the safest sequence is often to copy the original, paste the copy elsewhere, and only then delete (cut) the original.

DAMPED/DAMPENED

When the vibration of a wheel is reduced it is damped, but when you drive through a puddle your tire is dampened. “Dampened” always has to do with wetting, if only metaphorically: “the announcement that Bob’s parents were staying home after all dampened the spirits of the party-goers.” The parents are being a wet blanket.

DATA/DATUM

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, “criteria” and “media.” “Datum” is so rare now in English that people may assume “data” has no singular form. Many American usage communities, however, use “data” as a singular and some have even gone so far as to invent “datums” as a new plural. This is a case where you need to know the patterns of your context. An engineer or scientist used to writing “the data is” may well find that the editors of a journal or

publishing house insist on changing this phrase to “the data are.” Usage is so evenly split in this case that there is no automatic way of determining which is right; but writers addressing an international audience of nonspecialists would probably be safer in treating “data” as plural.

DECIMATE/ANNIHILATE, SLAUGHTER, ETC.

This comes under the heading of the truly picky. Despite the fact that most dictionaries have caved in, some of us still remember that when the Romans killed one out of every ten (decem) soldiers in a rebellious group as an example to the others, they decimated them. People sensitive to the roots of words are uncomfortably reminded of that ten percent figure when they see the word used instead to mean “annihilate,” “obliterate,” etc. You can usually get away with using “decimate” to mean “drastically reduce in numbers,” but you’re taking a bigger risk when you use it to mean “utterly wipe out.”

DEEP-SEEDED/DEEP-SEATED

Those who pine for the oral cultures of Ye Olden Dayes can rejoice as we enter an era where many people are unfamiliar with common expressions in print and know them only by hearsay.* The result is mistakes like “deep seeded.” The expression has nothing to do with a feeling being planted deep within one, but instead refers to its being seated firmly within one’s breast: “My aversion to anchovies is deep-seated.” Compounding their error, most people who misuse this phrase leave the hyphen out. Tennis players may be seeded, but not feelings.

*The notion that English should be spelled as it is pronounced is widespread, but history is against the reformers in most cases. Pronunciation is often a poor guide to spelling. The veneration of certain political movements for the teaching of reading through phonics is nicely caricatured by a t-shirt slogan I’ve seen: “Hukt awn fonix.”

DEFENCE/DEFENSE

If you are writing for a British publication, use “defence,” but the American “defense” has the advantages of greater antiquity, similarity to the words from which it was derived, and consistency with words like “defensible.”

DEFINATE/DEFINITE

Any vowel in an unstressed position can sometimes have the sound linguists call a “schwa:” “uh.” The result is that many people tend to guess when they hear this sound, but “definite” is definitely the right spelling. Also common are various misspellings of “definitely,” including the bizarre “defiantly.”

DEFUSE/DIFFUSE

You defuse a dangerous situation by treating it like a bomb and removing its fuse; to diffuse, in contrast, is to spread something out: “Bob’s cheap cologne diffused throughout the room, wrecking the wine-tasting.”

DEGRADE/DENIGRATE/DOWNGRADE

Many people use “downgrade” instead of “denigrate” to mean “defame, slander.” “Downgrade” is entirely different in meaning. When something is downgraded, it is lowered in grade (usually made worse), not just considered worse. “When the president of the company fled to Rio with fifteen million dollars, its bonds were downgraded to junk bond status.” “Degrade” is much more flexible in meaning. It can mean to lower in status or rank (like “downgrade”) or to corrupt or make contemptible; but it always has to do with actual reduction in value rather than mere insult, like “denigrate.” Most of the time when people use “downgrade” they would be better off instead using “insult,” “belittle” or “sneer at.”

DEJA VU

In French “deja vu” means literally “already seen” and usually refers to something excessively familiar. However the phrase, sans accent marks, was introduced into English mainly as a psychological term indicating the sensation one experiences when feeling that something has been experienced before when this is in fact not the case. If you feel strongly that you have been previously in a place where you know for a fact you have never before been, you are experiencing a sensation of deja vu. English usage is rapidly sliding back toward the French meaning, confusing listeners who expect the phrase to refer to a false sensation rather than a factual familiarity, as in “Congress is in session and talking about campaign finance reform, creating a sense of deja vu.” In this relatively new sense, the phrase has the same associations as the colloquial “same old, same old” (increasingly often misspelled “sameo, sameo” by illiterates).

Baseball player Yogi Berra famously mangled this expression in his redundant statement “It seems like it’s deja vu all over again.” Over the ensuing decades clever writers would allude to this blunder in their prose by repeating the phrase “deja vu all over again,” assuming that their readers would catch the allusion and share a chuckle with them. Unfortunately, recently the phrase has been worn to a frazzle and become all but substituted for the original, so that not only has it become a very tired joke indeed—a whole generation has grown up thinking that Berra’s malapropism is the correct form of the expression. Give it a rest, folks!

DEMOCRAT PARTY/DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Certain Republican members of Congress have played the childish game in recent years of referring to the opposition as the “Democrat Party,” hoping to imply that Democrats are not truly democratic. They succeed only in making themselves sound ignorant, and so will you if you imitate them. The name is “Democratic Party.”

DEPENDS/DEPENDS ON

In casual speech, we say “it depends who plays the best offense”; but in writing follow “depends” with “on.”

DEPRECIATE/DEPRECATE

To depreciate something is to actually make it worse, whereas to deprecate something is simply to speak or think of it in a manner that demonstrates your low opinion of it.

DESERT/DESSERT

Perhaps these two words are confused partly because “dessert” is one of the few words in English with a double “S” pronounced like “Z” (“brassiere” is another). That impoverished stretch of sand called a desert can only afford one “S.” In contrast, that rich gooey extra thing at the end of the meal called a dessert indulges in two of them. The word in the phrase “he got his just deserts” is confusingly pronounced just like “desserts.”

DEVICE/DEVISE

“Device” is a noun. A can-opener is a device. “Devise” is a verb. You can devise a plan for opening a can with a sharp rock instead. Only in law is “devise” properly used as a noun, meaning something deeded in a will.

DIALOGUE/DISCUSS

“Dialogue” as a verb in sentences like “the Math Department will dialogue with the Dean about funding” is commonly used jargon in business and education settings; but abhorred by traditionalists. Say “have a dialogue” or “discuss” instead.

DIETIES/DEITIES

This one is always good for a laugh. The gods are deities, after the Latin “deus,” meaning “god.”

DIFFERENT THAN/ DIFFERENT FROM/TO

Americans say “Scuba-diving is different from snorkeling,” the British sometimes say “different to” and those who don’t know any better say “different than.”

DIFFER/VARY

“Vary” can mean “differ,” but saying “our opinions vary” makes it sound as if they were changing all the time when what you really mean is “our opinions differ.” Pay attention to context when choosing one of these words.

DILEMMA/DIFFICULTY

A dilemma is a difficult choice, not just any difficulty or problem. Whether to invite your son’s mother to his high school graduation when your current wife hates her is a dilemma. Cleaning up after a hurricane is just a problem, though a difficult one.

DIRE STRAIGHTS/DIRE STRAITS

When you are threading your way through troubles as if you were traversing a dangerously narrow passage you are in “dire straits.” The expression and the band by that name are often transformed by those who don’t understand the word “strait” into “dire straights.”

See also “straightjacket/straitjacket.”

DISBURSE/DISPERSE

You disburse money by taking it out of your purse (French “bourse”) and distributing it. If you refuse to hand any money out the eager mob of beggars before you may disperse (scatter).

DISC/DISK

“Compact disc” is spelled with a “C” because that’s how its inventors decided it should be rendered; but a computer disk is spelled with a “K” (unless it’s a CD-ROM, of course). The New York Times insisted for many years on the spelling “compact disk” in its editorial pages, often incongruously next to ads containing the copyrighted spelling “disc”; but now even it has given in.

DISCREET/DISCRETE

The more common word is “discreet,” meaning “prudent, circumspect”: “When arranging the party for Agnes, be sure to be discreet; we want her to be surprised.” “Discrete” means “separate, distinct”: “He arranged the guest list into two discrete groups: meat-eaters and vegetarians.” Note how the T separates the two Es in “discrete.”

DISCUSSED/DISGUST

“Discussed” is the past tense of the verb “discuss.” Don’t substitute for it the noun “disgust” in such sentences as “The couple’s wedding plans were thoroughly discussed.”

DISINTERESTED/UNINTERESTED

A bored person is uninterested. Do not confuse this word with the much rarer “disinterested,” which means “objective, neutral”.

DISRESPECT

The hip-hop subculture has revived the use of “disrespect” as a verb. In the meaning to have or show disrespect, this usage has been long established, if unusual. However, the new street meaning of the term, ordinarily abbreviated to “dis,” is slightly but significantly different: to act disrespectfully, or—more frequently—insultingly toward someone. In some neighborhoods “dissing” is defined as merely failing to show sufficient terror in the face of intimidation. In those neighborhoods, it is wise to know how the term is used; but an applicant for a job who complains about having been “disrespected” elsewhere is likely to incur further disrespect . . . and no job. Street slang has its uses, but this is one instance which has not become generally accepted.

DOCTORIAL/DOCTORAL

“Doctoral” is occasionally misspelled—and often mispronounced—“doctorial.”

DOLLY/HANDCART

A dolly is a flat platform with wheels on it, often used to make heavy objects mobile, or by an auto mechanic lying on one under a car body. Many people mistakenly use this word to designate the vertically oriented two-wheeled device with upright handles and horizontal lip which is more properly called a “handcart” or “handtruck.”

DOMINATE/DOMINANT

The verb is “dominate”; the adjective is “dominant.” The dominant chimpanzee tends to dominate the others.

DONE/DID

The past participle of “do” is “done,” so it’s not “they have did what they promised not to do” but “they have done. . . .” But without a helping verb, the word is “did.” Nonstandard: “I done good on the test.” Standard: “I did well on the test.”

DOUBLE NEGATIVES

It is not true, as some assert, that double negatives are always wrong; but the pattern in formal speech and writing is that two negatives equal a mild positive: “he is a not untalented guitarist” means he has some talent. In informal speech, however, double negatives are intended as negatives: “he ain’t got no talent” means he is a lousy musician. People are rarely confused about the meaning of either pattern, but you do need to take your audience into account when deciding which pattern to follow.

One of the funniest uses of the literary double negative is Douglas Adams’ description of a machine dispensing “a substance almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea.”

DOUBT THAT/DOUBT WHETHER/DOUBT IF

If you really doubt that something is true (suspect that it’s false), use “doubt that”: “I doubt that Fred has really lost 25 pounds.” If you want to express genuine uncertainty, use “whether”: “I doubt whether we’ll see the comet if the clouds don’t clear soon.” “Doubt if” can be substituted for “doubt whether,” though it’s considered somewhat more casual, but don’t use it when you mean “doubt that.”

DOUBTLESSLY/DOUBTLESS

Leave off the unnecessary “-ly” in “doubtless.”

DOVE/DIVED

Although “dove” is a common form of the past tense of “dive,” a few authorities consider “dived” preferable in formal writing.

DOWNFALL/DRAWBACK

A downfall is something that causes a person’s destruction, either literal or figurative: “expensive cars were Fred’s downfall: he spent his entire inheritance on them and went bankrupt.” A drawback is not nearly so drastic, just a flaw or problem of some kind, and is normally applied to plans and activities, not to people: “Gloria’s plan to camp on Mosquito Island had just one drawback: she had forgotten to bring her insect repellent.”

DRANK/DRUNK

Many common verbs in English change form when their past tense is preceded by an auxiliary (“helping” verb): “I ran, I have run.” The same is true of “drink.” Don’t say “I’ve drank the beer” unless you want people to think you are drunk. An even more common error is “I drunk all the milk.” It’s “I’ve drunk the beer” and “I drank all the milk.”

DRASTIC

“Drastic” means “severe” and is always negative. Drastic measures are not just extreme, they are likely to have harmful side-effects. Don’t use this word or “drastically” in a positive or neutral sense. A drastic rise in temperature should be seen as downright dangerous, not just surprisingly large. Often people mean “dramatic” instead.

DRIER/DRYER

A clothes dryer makes the clothes drier.

DRIBBLE/DRIVEL

“Dribble” and “drivel” originally meant the same thing: drool. But the two words have become differentiated. When you mean to criticize someone else’s speech as stupid or pointless, the word you want is “drivel.”

DRIVE/DISK

A hard drive and a hard disk are much the same thing; but when it comes to removable computer media, the drive is the machinery which turns and reads the disk. Be sure not to ask for a drive when all you need is a disk.

DRUG/DROGGED

“Well, look what the cat drug in!” Unless you are trying to render dialectical speech to convey a sense of down-home rusticity, use “drogged” as the past tense of “drag.”

DUAL/DUEL

“Dual” is an adjective describing the two-ness of something—dual carburetors, for instance. A “duel” is a formal battle intended to settle a dispute.

DUE TO THE FACT THAT/BECAUSE

Although “due to” is now a generally acceptable synonym for “because,” “due to the fact that” is a clumsy and wordy substitute that should be avoided in formal writing. “Due to” is often misspelled “do to.”

DYEING /DYING

If you are using dye to change your favorite t-shirt from white to blue you are dyeing it; but if you don’t breathe for so long that your face turns blue, you may be dying.

E.G./I.E.

When you mean “for example,” use e.g. It is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *exempli gratia*. When you mean “that is,” use “i.e.” It is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *id est*. Either can be used to clarify a preceding statement, the first by example, the second by restating the idea more clearly or expanding upon it. Because these uses are so similar, the two abbreviations are easily confused. If you just stick with good old English “for example” and “that is” you won’t give anyone a chance to sneer at you. If you insist on using the abbreviation, perhaps “example given” will remind you to use “e.g.,” while “in effect” suggests “I.E.”

EACH

“Each” as a subject is always singular: think of it as equivalent to “every one.” The verb whose subject it is must also be singular. Some uses, like “to keep them from fighting, each dog has been given its own bowl,” cause no problem. No one is tempted to say “have been given.” But when a prepositional phrase with a plural object intervenes between subject and verb, we are likely to be misled into saying things like “Each of the children have to memorize their own locker combinations.” The subject is “each,” not “children.” The tendency to avoid specifying gender by using “their” adds to pressure toward plurality; but the correct version of this sentence is “Each of the children has to memorize his or her own locker combination.” One can avoid the entire problem by pluralizing throughout: “All the children have to memorize their own locker combinations” (but see the entry on singular “they”). In many uses, however, “each” is not the subject, as in “We each have our own favorite flavor of ice cream” which is correct because “we” and not “each” is the subject of the verb “have”.

“Each other” cannot be a subject, so the question of verb number does not arise; but the number of the possessive creates a problem for some writers. “They gazed into each other’s eyes” is correct and “each others” is incorrect because “each other” is singular. Reword to “each gazed into the other’s eyes” to see the logic behind this rule. “Each other” is always two distinct words separated by a space although it functions grammatically as a sort of compound word.

EARTH, MOON

Soil is lower-case “earth.” And in most uses even the planet itself remains humbly in lower-case letters: “peace on earth.” But in astronomical contexts, the Earth comes into its own with a proud initial capital, and in science fiction it drops the introductory article and becomes “Earth,” just like Mars and Venus. A similar pattern applies to Earth’s satellite: “shine on, harvest moon,” but “from the Earth to the Moon.” Because other planets also have moons, it never loses its article.

ECONOMICAL/ECONOMIC

Something is economical if it saves you money; but if you’re talking about the effect of some measure on the world’s economy, it’s an economic effect.

ECSTATIC

Pronounced “eck-sta-tic,” not “ess-ta-tic.”

ECT./ETC.

“Etc.” is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *et cetera*, meaning “and others.” (Et means “and” in French too.) Just say “et cetera” out loud to yourself to remind yourself of the correct order of the “T” and “C.” Also to be avoided is the common mispronunciation “excetera.” “And etc.” is a redundancy.

-ED/-ING

In some dialects it is common to say “my shoes need shined” instead of the standard “my shoes need shining” or “my shoes need to be shined.”

-ED/-T

You have learnt your lessons only in U.K.-influenced countries, you’ve learned them in the U.S. There are several common verbs which often have “T” endings in Britain which seem a little quaint and poetic in American English, where we prefer “-ED.” Other examples: “dreamt/dreamed,” “dwelt/dwelled,” “leant/leaned,” “leapt/leaped,” and “spelt/spelled.” However, the following alternatives are both common in the U.S.: “burned/burnt” and “kneeled/knelt.”

EI/IE

The familiar rule is that English words are spelled with the “I” before the “E” unless they follow a “C,” as in “receive.” But it is important to add that words in which the vowel sound is an “A” like “neighbor” and “weigh” are also spelled with the “E” first. And there are a few exceptions like “counterfeit” and “seize.”

See also “neice/niece.”

EITHER

“Either” often gets misplaced in a sentence: “He either wanted to build a gambling casino or a convent” should be “He wanted to build either a gambling casino or a convent.” Put “either” just before the first thing being compared.

EITHER ARE/EITHER IS

As a subject, “either” is singular. It’s the opposite of “both,” and refers to one at a time: “Either ketchup or mustard is good on a hot dog.” But if “either” is modifying a subject in an “either . . . or” phrase, then the number of the verb is determined by the number of the second noun: “Either the puppy or the twins seem to need my attention every other minute.”

ELAPSE/LAPSE

Both these words come from a Latin root meaning “to slip.” “Elapse” almost always refers to the passage of time. “Lapse” usually refers to a change of state, as in lapsing from consciousness into unconsciousness. Here are examples of the correct uses of these words you might get in the mail: “Six months have elapsed since your last dental appointment” and “You have allowed your subscription to Bride Magazine to lapse.” Occasionally “lapse” can be used as a synonym of “elapse” in the sense “to slip away.” Substituting one for the other is dangerous, however, if you are a lawyer. Insurance policies and collective bargaining agreements do not elapse when they expire, they lapse.

ELICIT/ILLICIT

The lawyer tries to elicit a description of the attacker from the witness. “Elicit” is always a verb. “Illicit,” in contrast, is always an adjective describing something illegal or naughty.

ELLIPSES

Those dots that come in the middle of a quotation to indicate something omitted are called an “ellipsis” (plural “ellipses”): “Tex told Sam to get the . . . cow out of the bunk house.” Here Tex’s language has been censored, but you are more likely to have a use for ellipses when quoting some source in a paper: “Ishmael remarks at the beginning of Moby Dick, ‘some years ago . . . I thought I would sail about a little’ — a very understated way to begin a novel of high adventure.” The three dots stand for a considerable stretch of prose that has been omitted. If the ellipsis ends your sentence, you need four dots, the first of which is a period: From the same paragraph in Moby Dick: “almost all men . . . cherish very nearly the same feelings. . . .” Note that the period in the second ellipsis has to be snug up against the last word quoted, with spaces between the other dots.

Some modern styles do not call for ellipses at the beginning and ending of quoted matter unless not doing so would be genuinely misleading, so check with your teacher or editor if you’re uncertain whether to use one in those positions. It is never correct to surround a quoted single word or short phrase with ellipses: “Romeo tells Juliet that by kissing her again his ‘sin is purged’” (note, by the way, that I began the quotation after the first word in the phrase “my sin is purged” in order to make it work grammatically in the context of the sentence).

When text is typeset, the spaces are often but not always omitted between the dots in an ellipsis. Since modern computer printer output looks much more like typeset writing than old-fashioned typewriting, you may be tempted to omit the spaces; but it is better to include them and let the publisher decide whether they should be eliminated.

An ellipsis that works perfectly well on your computer may “break” when your text is transferred to another if it comes at the end of a line, with one or more of the dots wrapping around to the next line. To avoid this, learn how to type “non-breaking spaces” between the dots of ellipses: in Word for Windows it’s control-shift-spacebar; on a Mac, it’s option-spacebar. When writing HTML code to create a Web page, make a nonbreaking space with this code: ` ` (angle brackets are standard HTML “quotation marks” and are not to be actually typed as part of the code).

EMBARESS/EMBARRASS

You can pronounce the last two syllables as two distinct words as a jog to memory, except that then the word may be misspelled “embareass,” which isn’t right either. You also have to remember the double R: “embarrass.”

EMERGENT/EMERGENCY

The error of considering “emergent” to be the adjectival form of “emergency” is common only in medical writing, but it is becoming widespread. “Emergent” properly means “emerging” and normally refers to events that are just beginning—barely noticeable rather than catastrophic. “Emergency” is an adjective as well as a noun, so rather than writing “emergent care,” use the homely “emergency care.”

EMIGRATE/IMMIGRATE

To “emigrate” is to leave a country. The E at the beginning of the word is related to the E in other words having to do with going out, such as “exit.” “Immigrate,” in contrast, looks as if it might have something to do with going in, and indeed it does: it means to move into a new country. The same distinction applies to “emigration” and “immigration.” Note the double M in the second form. A migrant is someone who continually moves about.

EMINENT/IMMINENT/IMMANENT

By far the most common of these words is “eminent,” meaning “prominent, famous.” “Imminent,” in phrases like “facing imminent disaster,” means “threatening.” It comes from Latin *minere*, meaning “to project or overhang.” Think of a mine threatening to cave in. Positive events can also be imminent: they just need to be coming soon. The rarest of the three is “immanent,” used by philosophers to mean “inherent” and by theologians to mean “present throughout the universe” when referring to God. It comes from Latin “manere,” “remain.” Think of God creating “man” in his own image.

EMPHASIZE ON/EMPHASIZE

You can place emphasis on something, or you can emphasize it, but you can’t emphasize on it or stress on it, though you can place stress on it.

ENORMITY/ENORMOUSNESS

Originally these two words were synonymous, but “enormity” got whittled down to meaning “monstrous” or “outrageous.” Don’t wonder at the “enormity” of the Palace of Versailles unless you wish to express horror at this embodiment of Louis XIV’s ego. “Enormity” can also be used as a noun meaning “monstrosity.”

EMPATHY/SYMPATHY

If you think you feel just like another person, you are feeling empathy. If you just feel sorry for another person, you’re feeling sympathy.

EMPHASIZE ON/EMPHASIZE

You can place emphasis on something, or you can emphasize it, but you can’t emphasize on it or stress on it, though you can place stress on it.

END RESULT/END

Usually a redundancy. Most of the time plain “end” will do fine.

ENQUIRE/INQUIRE

These are alternative spellings of the same word. “Enquire” is perhaps slightly more common in the U.K., but either is acceptable in the U.S.

ENTHUSE

“Enthuse” is a handy word and “state enthusiastically” is not nearly so striking; but unfortunately “enthuse” is not acceptable in the most formal contexts.

ENVELOP/ENVELOPE

To wrap something up in a covering is to envelop it (pronounced “enVELLup”). The specific wrapping you put around a letter is an envelope (pronounced variously, but with the accent on the first syllable).

ENVIOUS/JEALOUS

Although these are often treated as synonyms, there is a difference. You are envious of what others have that you lack. Jealousy, on the other hand, involves wanting to hold on to what you do have. You can be jealous of your boyfriend’s attraction to other women, but you’re envious of your boyfriend’s CD collection.

ENVIROMENT/ENVIRONMENT

The second N in “environment” is seldom pronounced distinctly, so it’s not surprising that is often omitted in writing. If you know the related word “environs” it may help remind you.

EPIGRAM/EPIGRAPH/EPITAPH/EPITHET

An epigram is a pithy saying, usually humorous. Mark Twain was responsible for many striking, mostly cynical epigrams, such as “Always do right. That will gratify some of the people, and astonish the rest.” Unfortunately, he was also responsible for an even more famous one that has been confusing people ever since: “Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” It’s true that the moon keeps one side away from the earth, but—if you don’t count the faint glow reflected from the earth—it is not any darker than the side that faces us.

In fact, over time, the side facing us is darkened slightly more often because it is occasionally eclipsed by the shadow of the earth.

An epigraph is a brief quotation used to introduce a piece of writing or the inscription on a statue or building.

An epitaph is the inscription on a tombstone or some other tribute to a dead person.

In literature, an epithet is a term which replaces or is added to the name of a person, like “clear-eyed Athena,” in which “clear-eyed” is the epithet. You are more likely to encounter the term in its negative sense, as a term of insult or abuse: “the shoplifter hurled epithets at the guard who had arrested her.”

EPITOMY/EPITOME

Nothing makes you look quite so foolish as spelling a sophisticated word incorrectly. Taken directly from Latin, where it means “abridge-ment,” “epitome” is now most often used to designate an extremely representative example of the general class: “Snow White is the epitome of a Disney cartoon feature.” Those who don’t misspell this word often mispronounce it, misled by its spelling, as “EP-i-tohm,” but the proper pronunciation is “ee-PIT-o-mee.” The word means “essence,” not “climax,” so instead of writing “the market had reached the epitome of frenzied selling at noon,” use “peak” or a similar word.

ETHNIC

It’s misleading to refer to minority groups as “ethnics” since everyone has ethnicity, even a dominant majority.

EVERY

“Every,” “everybody” and “everyone” and related expressions are normally treated as singular in American English: “Every woman I ask out tells me she already has plans for Saturday night.” However, constructions like “everyone brought their own lunch” are widely accepted now because of a desire to avoid specifying “his” or “her.” See “they/their (singular).”

EVERYDAY

“Everyday” is a perfectly good adjective, as in “I’m most comfortable in my everyday clothes.” The problem comes when people turn the adverbial phrase “every day” into a single word. It is incorrect to write “I take a shower everyday.” It should be “I take a shower every day.”

EVERYTIME/EVERY TIME

“Every time” is always two separate words.

EVIDENCE TO/EVIDENCE OF

You can provide evidence to a court, even enough evidence to convict someone; but the standard expression “is evidence of” requires “of” rather than “to” in sentences like this: “Driving through the front entrance of the Burger King is evidence of Todd’s inexperience in driving.” If you could substitute “evidences” or “evidenced” in your sentence, you need “of.”

EXACT SAME/EXACTLY THE SAME

In casual speech we often say things like “the fruitcake he gave me was the exact same one I’d given him last Christmas,” but in formal English the phrase is “exactly the same.”

EXALT/EXULT

When you celebrate joyfully, you exult. When you raise something high (even if only in your opinion), you exalt it. Neither word has an “H” in it.

EXCAPE/ESCAPE

The proper spelling is “escape.” Say it that way too.

EXCEPTIONAL/EXCEPTIONABLE

If you take exception (object) to something, you find it “exceptionable.” The more common word is “exceptional,” applied to things that are out of the ordinary, usually in a positive way: “these are exceptional Buffalo wings.”

EXHILARATION/EXHILARATION

“Exhilaration” is closely related to “hilarious,” whose strongly accented A should help remind you of the correct spelling.

EXPONENTIAL

Something grows exponentially when it repeatedly grows by multiples of some factor in a rapidly accelerating fashion. Don’t use the word loosely to refer to ordinary rapid, but steady, growth.

See also “orders of magnitude.”

EXPRESSES THAT/SAYS THAT

“In her letter Jane expresses that she is getting irritated with me for not writing” should be corrected to “In her letter Jane says that. . . .” You can express an idea or a thought, but you can’t ever express that. In technical terms, “express” is a transitive verb which requires an object.

EXPRESSO/ESPRESSO

I’ve read several explanations of the origin of this word: the coffee is made expressly for you upon your order, or the steam is expressed through the grounds, or (as most people suppose—and certainly wrongly) the coffee is made at express speed. One thing is certain: the word is “espresso,” not “expresso.”

While you’re at an American espresso stand, you might muse on the fact that both “biscotti” and “panini” are plural forms, but you’re likely to baffle the barista if you ask in correct Italian for a biscotto or a panino.

IN THE FACT THAT/BY THE FACT THAT

The correct phrase is “by the fact that,” not “in the fact that.” While we’re at it, “infact” is not a word; “in fact” is always a two-word phrase.

FACTOID

The “-oid” ending in English is normally added to a word to indicate that an item is not the real thing. A humanoid is not quite human. Originally “factoid” was an ironic term indicating that the “fact” being offered was not actually factual. However, CNN and other sources have taken to treating the “-oid” as if it were a mere diminutive, and using the term to mean “trivial but true fact.” As a result, the definition of “factoid” is hopelessly confused and it’s probably better to avoid using the term altogether.

FAIR/FARE

When you send your daughter off to camp, you hope she’ll fare well. That’s why you bid her a fond farewell. “Fair” as a verb is a rare word meaning “to smooth a surface to prepare it for being joined to another.”

FARTHER/FURTHER

Some authorities (like the Associated Press) insist on “farther” to refer to physical distance and on “further” to refer to an extent of time or degree, but others treat the two words as interchangeable except for insisting on “further” for “in addition,” “moreover.” You’ll always be safe in making the distinction; some people get really testy about this.

FASTLY/FAST

“Fastly” is an old form that has died out in English. Interest in soccer is growing fast, not “fastly.”

FATAL/FATEFUL

A “fatal” event is a deadly one; a “fateful” one is determined by fate. If there are no casualties left lying at the scene—whether mangled corpses or failed negotiations—the word you are seeking is “fateful.” The latter word also has many positive uses, such as “George fondly remembered that fateful night in which he first met the woman he was to love to his dying day.”

FAZE/PHASE

“Faze” means to embarrass or disturb, but is almost always used in the negative sense, as in “the fact that the overhead projector bulb was burned out didn’t faze her.” “Phase” is a noun or verb having to do with an aspect of something. “He’s just going through a temperamental phase.” “They’re going to phase in the new accounting procedures gradually.” Unfortunately, Star Trek has confused matters by calling its ray pistols phasers. Too bad they aren’t fazers instead.

FEARFUL/FEARSOME

To be “fearful” is to be afraid. To be “fearsome” is to cause fear in others. Remember that someone who is fierce is fearsome rather than fearful.

FEBUARY/FEBRUARY

Few people pronounce the first R in “February” distinctly, so it is not surprising that it is often omitted in spelling. This poor month is short on days; don’t further impoverish it by robbing it of one of its letters.

FIREY/FIERY

It’s “fire,” so why isn’t it “firey?” If you listen closely, you hear that “fire” has two distinct vowel sounds in it: “fi-er.” Spelling the adjective “fiery” helps to preserve that double sound.

50s

There’s no requirement for the apostrophe before the “S” in decade names like 50s and 60s, since there are no omitted letters, though it’s also acceptable to include one. The term may be written ’50s since “19” is being omitted, but “50s” is fine too. Writers who wish to have their references to decades clearly understood in the twenty-first century would be well advised not to omit the first two digits.

Note that you may have to turn off “smart quotes” in your word processor to get a leading apostrophe like the one in “’50s” to curl correctly unless you know how to type the character directly.

FINALIZE/FINISH, PUT INTO FINAL FORM

“Finalize” is very popular among bureaucrats, but many people hate it. Avoid it unless you know that everyone in your environment uses it too.

FIRST ANNUAL

Some people get upset when the “first annual” occurrence of some event is announced, arguing that it doesn’t become annual until it’s been repeated. But “first annual” simply means “the first of what is planned to be an annual series of events”—it’s a fine expression.

FIRST PERSON

Some teachers frown on the first person in student writing, striking out “I,” “me,” and “myself” whenever they encounter them; but although there are times when it is inappropriate to call attention to yourself, writing something like “public displays of affection are disgusting” is not more modest than “public displays of affection disgust me.” The impersonal form arrogantly implies that you are the final authority and that all right-minded people must agree with you. The phrase “the author” substituted for “I” is no longer generally used even in the most formal writing. When you are arguing for a theory or opinion, it is often best to stand squarely behind it by using the first person.

FISCAL/PHYSICAL

The middle syllable of “physical” is often omitted in pronunciation, making it sound like the unrelated word “fiscal.” Sound that unaccented “I” distinctly.

FLAIR/FLARE

“Flair” is conspicuous talent: “She has a flair for organization.” “Flare” is either a noun meaning “flame” or a verb meaning to blaze with light or to burst into anger.

FLAMMABLE/INFLAMMABLE

The prefix “in-” does not indicate negation here; it comes from the word “inflamm.” “Flammable” and “inflammable” both mean “easy to catch on fire”; but so many people misunderstand the latter term that it’s better to stick with “flammable” in safety warnings.

FLAUNT/FLOUT

To flaunt is to show off: you flaunt your new necklace by wearing it to work. “Flout” has a more negative connotation; it means to treat with contempt some rule or standard. The cliché is “to flout convention.” Flaunting may be in bad taste because it’s ostentatious, but it is not a violation of standards.

FLESH OUT/FLUSH OUT

To “flesh out” an idea is to give it substance, as a sculptor adds clay flesh to a skeletal armature. To “flush out” a criminal is to drive him or her out into the open. The latter term is derived from bird-hunting, in which one flushes out a covey of quail. If you are trying to develop something further, use “flesh”; but if you are trying to reveal something hitherto concealed, use “flush.”

FLOPPY DISK/HARD DISK

Floppy disks are fast disappearing from the computer world, but it’s been many years since they were literally floppy. The fact that a 3 1/5" diskette is enclosed in a hard plastic case should not lead you to call it a “hard disk.” That’s a high-capacity storage medium like the main disk inside your computer on which your programs, operating system, and data are stored.

FLOUNDER/FOUNDER

As a verb, “founder” means “to fill with water and sink.” It is also used metaphorically of various kinds of equally catastrophic failures. In contrast, to flounder is to thrash about in the water (like a flounder), struggling to stay alive. “Flounder” is also often used metaphorically to indicate various sorts of desperate struggle. If you’re sunk, you’ve foundered. If you’re still struggling, you’re floundering.

FOOT/FEET

You can use eight-foot boards to side a house, but “foot” is correct only in this sort of adjectival phrase combined with a number (and usually hyphenated). The boards are eight feet (not foot) long. It’s always X feet per second and X feet away.

FOOTNOTES/ENDNOTES

About the time that computers began to make the creation and printing of footnotes extremely simple and cheap, style manuals began to urge a shift away from them to endnotes printed at the ends of chapters or at the end of a book or paper rather than at the foot of the page. I happen to think this was a big mistake; but in any case, if you are using endnotes, don’t call them “footnotes.”

FOR/FORE/FOUR

The most common member of this trio is the preposition “for,” which is not a problem for most people. “Fore” always has to do with the front of something (it’s what you shout to warn someone when you’ve sent a golf ball their way). “Four” is just the number “4.”

FOR ALL INTENSIVE PURPOSES/FOR ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES

Another example of the oral transformation of language by people who don’t read much. “For all intents and purposes” is an old cliché which won’t thrill anyone, but using the mistaken alternative is likely to elicit guffaws.

FOR FREE/FREE

Some people object to “for free” because any sentence containing the phrase will read just as well without the “for,” but it is standard English.

FOR SALE/ON SALE

If you're selling something, it's for sale; but if you lower the price, it goes on sale.

FORBIDDING/FOREBODING/FORMIDABLE

"Foreboding" means "ominous," as in "The sky was a foreboding shade of gray" (i.e. predictive of a storm). The prefix "fore-" with an E, often indicates futurity, e. g. "forecast," "foreshadowing" and "foreword" (a prefatory bit of writing at the beginning of a book, often misspelled "forword"). A forbidding person or task is hostile or dangerous: "The trek across the desert to the nearest latte stand was forbidding." The two are easily confused because some things, like storms, can be both foreboding and forbidding.

"Formidable," which originally meant "fear-inducing" ("Mike Tyson is a formidable opponent") has come to be used primarily as a compliment meaning "awe-inducing" ("Gary Kasparov's formidable skills as a chess player were of no avail against Deep Blue").

See also "fearful/fearsome."

FORCEFUL, FORCIBLE, FORCED

These words sometimes overlap, but generally "forceful" means "powerful" ("He imposed his forceful personality on the lions.") while "forcible" must be used instead to describe the use of force ("The burglar made a forcible entry into the apartment."). "Forced" is often used for the latter purpose, but some prefer to reserve this word to describe something that is done or decided upon as a result of outside causes without necessarily being violent: "a forced landing," "a forced smile," "forced labor."

FOREGO/FORGO

The E in "forego" tells you it has to do with going before. It occurs mainly in the expression "foregone conclusion," a conclusion arrived at in advance. "Forgo" means to abstain from or do without. "After finishing his steak, he decided to forgo the blueberry cheesecake."

FORMALLY/FORMERLY

These two are often mixed up in speech. If you are doing something in a formal manner, you are behaving formally; but if you previously behaved differently, you did so formerly.

FORESEE/FORSEE

"Foresee" means "to see into the future." There are lots of words with the prefix "fore-" which are future-oriented, including "foresight," "foretell," "forethought," and "foreword," all of which are often misspelled by people who omit the E. Just remember: what golfers shout when they are warning people ahead of them about the shot they are about to make is "fore!"

FORTUITOUS/FORTUNATE

"Fortuitous" events happen by chance; they need not be fortunate events, only random ones: "It was purely fortuitous that the meter reader came along five minutes before I returned to my car." Although fortunate events may be fortuitous, when you mean "lucky," use "fortunate."

FOUL/FOWL

A chicken is a fowl. A poke in the eye is a foul.

FRANKENSTEIN

"Frankenstein" is the name of the scientist who creates the monster in Mary Shelley's novel. The monster itself has no name, but is referred to popularly as "Frankenstein's monster."

FRANKLY

Sentences beginning with this word are properly admissions of something shocking or unflattering to the speaker; but when a public spokesperson for a business or government is speaking, it almost always precedes a self-serving statement. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" is correct; but "Frankly, I think the American people can make their own decisions about health care" is an abuse of language. The same contortion of meaning is common in related phrases. When you hear a public figure say, "to be completely honest with you," expect a lie.

FRENCH DIP WITH AU JUS

This diner classic consists of sliced roast beef on a more or less firm bun, with a side dish of broth in which to dip it. "Au jus" means "with broth"; so adding "with" to "au jus" is redundant. In fancier restaurants, items are listed entirely in French with the English translation underneath:

Tete de cochon avec ses tripes farcies Pig's head stuffed with tripe

Mixing the languages is hazardous if you don't know what the original means. "With au jus broth" is also seen from time to time. People generally know what a French dip sandwich is, and they'll see the broth when it comes. Why not just call it a "French dip?"

FROM . . . TO

"From soup to nuts" makes sense because soup was the traditional first course in a formal meal, nuts the last. Similarly "from A to Z" makes sense because these are the first and last letters of the alphabet. But this construction which identifies the extremes of a spectrum or range is often improperly used when no such extremes are being identified, as in "She tried everything from "penicillin to sulfa drugs." These are not

extremes, just examples of different sorts of drugs. Even worse is “he gave his daughter everything from a bicycle to lawn darts to a teddy bear.” A range can’t have more than two extremes. “He gave his daughter everything from paper dolls to a Cadillac” conveys the notion of a spectrum from very cheap to very expensive, and is fine. Often when people are tempted to use “from . . . to” they would be better off using a different expression, as, for example, in this sentence: “She tried all sorts of medicines, including penicillin and sulfa drugs.”

MOUNT FUJIYAMA/FUJIYAMA

“Yama” means “mountain” in Japanese, so when you say “Mount Fujiyama” you are saying “Mount Fuji Mountain.” The Japanese usually say “Fuji-san”; but “Fujiyama,” or “Mount Fuji” is standard in English—just be aware that both sound “foreign” to Japanese native speakers.

-FUL/-FULS

It’s one cupful, but two cupfuls, not “two cupsful.” The same goes for “spoonfuls” and “glassfuls.”

FULSOME

Because its most common use is in the phrase “fulsome praise,” many people suppose that this word means something like “generous” or “whole-hearted.” Actually, it means “disgusting,” and “fulsome praise” is disgustingly exaggerated praise.

G/Q

Lower-case “q” is the mirror image of lower-case “g” in many typefaces, and the two are often confused with each other and the resulting misspelling missed in proofreading, for instance “quilt” when “guilt” is intended.

GAFF/GAFFE

“Gaffe” is a French word meaning “embarrassing mistake,” and should not be mixed up with “gaff”: a large hook.

GAMUT/GAUNTLET

To “run a gamut” is to go through the whole scale or spectrum of something. To “run the gauntlet” (also gantlet) is to run between two lines of people who are trying to beat you. And don’t confuse “gamut” with “gambit,” a play in chess, and by extension, a tricky maneuver of any kind.

GAURD/GUARD

Too bad the Elizabethan “guard” won out over the earlier, French-derived spelling “garde”; but the word was never spelled “gaurd.” The standard spelling is related to Italian and Spanish “guarda,” pronounced “gwarda.”

GENDER

Feminists eager to remove references to sexuality from discussions of females and males which don’t involve mating or reproduction revived an older meaning of “gender” which had come to refer in modern times chiefly to language, as a synonym for “sex” in phrases such as “Our goal is to achieve gender equality.” Americans, always nervous about sex, eagerly embraced this usage, which is now standard. In some scholarly fields, “sex” is used to label biologically determined aspects of maleness and femaleness (reproduction, etc.) while “gender” refers to their socially determined aspects (behavior, attitudes, etc.); but in ordinary speech this distinction is not always maintained. It is disingenuous to pretend that people who use “gender” in the new senses are making an error, just as it is disingenuous to maintain that “Ms.” means “manuscript” (that’s “MS”). Nevertheless, I must admit I was startled to discover that the tag on my new trousers describes not only their size and color, but their “gender.”

GHANDI/GANDHI

Mohandas K. Gandhi’s name has an H after the D, not after the G. Note that “Mahatma” (“great soul”) is a an honorific title, not actually part of his birth name.

GIBE/JIBE/JIVE

“Gibe” is a now rare term meaning “to tease.” “Jibe” means “to agree,” but is usually used negatively, as in “the alibis of the two crooks didn’t jibe.” The latter word is often confused with “jive,” which derives from slang which originally meant to treat in a jazzy manner (“Jivin’ the Blues Away”) but also came to be associated with deception (“Don’t give me any of that jive”).

GIG/JIG

“The jig is up” is an old slang expression meaning “the game is over—we’re caught.” A musician’s job is a gig.

GILD/GUILD

You gild an object by covering it with gold; you can join an organization like the Theatre Guild.

GOD

When “God” is the name of a god, as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (“Allah” is just Arabic for “God,” and many modern Muslims translate the name when writing in English), it needs to be capitalized like any other name. When it is used as a generic term, as in “He looks like a Greek god,” it is not capitalized.

If you see the word rendered “G*d” or “G-d” it’s not an error, but a Jewish writer reverently following the Orthodox prohibition against

spelling out the name of the deity in full.

GOES

“So he goes ‘I thought your birthday was tomorrow,’ and I’m—like—‘well, duh!’” Perhaps this bizarre pattern developed in analogy to childish phrases such as “the cow goes ‘moo’” and “the piggy goes ‘oink, oink’.” Is there any young person unaware that the use of “go” to mean “say” drives most adults crazy? Granted, it’s deliberate slang rather than an involuntary error; but if you get into the habit of using it all the time, you may embarrass yourself in front of a class by saying something witless like “So then Juliet goes ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’”

GONE/WENT

This is one of those cases in which a common word has a past participle which is not formed by the simple addition of -ED and which often trip people up. “I should have went to the business meeting, but the game was tied in the ninth” should be “I should have gone. . . .” The same problem crops up with the two forms of the verb “to do.” Say “I should have done my taxes before the IRS called” rather than “I should have did. . . .”

See “drank/drunken.”

GOOD/WELL

“Good” is the adjective, “well” is the adverb. You do something well, but you give someone something good. The exception is verbs of sensation in phrases such as “the pie smells good,” or “I feel good.” Despite the arguments of nigglers, this is standard usage. Saying “the pie smells well” would imply that the pastry in question had a nose. “I feel well” is also generally acceptable; but it is not the only correct usage.

GOT/GOTTEN

In England, the old word “gotten” dropped out of use except in such stock phrases as “ill-gotten” and “gotten up,” but in the U.S. it is frequently used as the past participle of “get.” Sometimes the two are interchangeable. However, “got” implies current possession, as in “I’ve got just five dollars to buy my dinner with.” “Gotten,” in contrast, often implies the process of getting hold of something: “I’ve gotten five dollars for cleaning out Mrs. Quimby’s shed” emphasizing the earning of the money rather than its possession. Phrases that involve some sort of process usually involve “gotten”: “My grades have gotten better since I moved out of the fraternity.” When you have to leave, you’ve got to go. If you say you’ve “gotten to go” you’re implying someone gave you permission to go.

GOVERNMENT

Be careful to pronounce the first “N” in “government.”

GRADUATE/GRADUATE FROM

In certain dialects (notably that of New York City) it is common to say “he is going to graduate school in June” rather than the more standard “graduate from.” When writing for a national or international audience, use the “from.”

GRAMMER/GRAMMAR

It’s amazing how many people write to thank me for helping them with their “grammer.” It’s “grammar.” The word is often incorrectly used to label patterns of spelling and usage which have nothing to do with the structure of language, the proper subject of grammar in the most conservative sense. Not all bad writing is due to bad grammar.

GRATIS/GRATUITOUS

If you do something nice without being paid, you do it “gratis.” Technically, such a deed can also be “gratuitous”; but if you do or say something obnoxious and uncalled for, it’s always “gratuitous,” not “gratis.”

GREATFUL/GRATEFUL

Your appreciation may be great, but you express gratitude by being grateful.

GRIEVOUS/GRIEVOUS

There are just two syllables in “grievous,” and it’s pronounced “grieve-us.”

GRISLY/GRIZZLY

“Grisly” means “horrible”; a “grizzly” is a bear. “The grizzly left behind the grisly remains of his victim.” “Grizzled,” means “having gray hairs,” not to be confused with “gristly,” full of gristle.

GROUND ZERO

“Ground zero” refers to the point at the center of the impact of a nuclear bomb, so it is improper to talk about “building from ground zero” as if it were a place of new beginnings. You can start from scratch, or begin at zero, but if you’re at ground zero, you’re at the end.

GROUP (PLURAL VS. SINGULAR)

When the group is being considered as a whole, it can be treated as a single entity: “the group was ready to go on stage.” But when the individuality of its members is being emphasized, “group” is plural: “the group were in disagreement about where to go for dinner.”

GROW

We used to grow our hair long or grow tomatoes in the yard, but now we are being urged to “grow the economy” or “grow your investments.” Business and government speakers have extended this usage widely, but it irritates traditionalists. Use “build,” “increase,” “expand,” “develop,” or “cause to grow” instead in formal writing.

GYP/CHEAT

Gypsies complain that “gyp” (“cheat”) reflects bias; but the word is so well entrenched and its origin so obscure to most users that there is little hope of eliminating it from standard use any time soon.

HAIRBRAINED/HAREBRAINED

Although “hairbrained” is common, the original word “harebrained,” means “silly as a hare” (rabbit) and is preferred in writing.

HANGING INDENTS

Bibliographies are normally written using hanging indents, where the first line extends out to the left-hand margin, but the rest of the entry is indented.

Twain, Mark. Mark Twain at the Buffalo Express: Articles and Sketches by America’s Favorite Humorist, edited by Joseph B. McCullough and Janice McIntire-Strasburg (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

These are extremely easy to create on a word processor, but many people have never mastered the technique. Normally the left-hand margin marker at the top of the page consists of two small arrows. Drag the top one to the right to make a normal indent, the bottom one to create a hanging indent. In most programs, you have to hold down the shift key while dragging the bottom marker to leave the top part behind. Don’t get into the habit of substituting a carriage return and a tab or spaces to create hanging indents because when your work is transferred to a different computer the result may look quite different—and wrong.

HARDLY

When Bill says “I can’t hardly bend over with this backache,” he means he can hardly bend over, and that’s what he should say. Similarly, when Jane says “you can feed the cat without hardly bending over” she means “almost without bending over.”

HARDLY NEVER/HARDLY EVER

The expression is “hardly ever.”

HARDY/HEARTY

These two words overlap somewhat, but usually the word you want is “hearty.” The standard expressions are “a hearty appetite,” “a hearty meal,” a “hearty handshake,” “a hearty welcome,” and “hearty applause.” “Hardy” turns up in “hale and hardy,” but should not be substituted for “hearty” in the other expressions. “Party hearty” and “party hardy” are both common renderings of a common youth saying, but the first makes more sense.

HEADING/BOUND

If you’re reporting on traffic conditions, it’s redundant to say “heading northbound on I-5.” It’s either “heading north” or “northbound.”

HEARING-IMPAIRED/DEAF

“Hearing-impaired” is not an all-purpose substitute for “deaf” since it strongly implies some residual ability to hear.

HIV VIRUS

“HIV” stands for “human immunodeficiency virus,” so adding the word “virus” to the acronym creates a redundancy. “HIV” is the name of the organism which is the cause of AIDS, not a name for the disease itself. A person may be HIV-positive (a test shows the person to be infected with the virus) without having yet developed AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). HIV is the cause, AIDS the result.

HANGED/HUNG

Originally these words were pretty much interchangeable, but “hanged” eventually came to be used pretty exclusively to mean “executed by hanging.” Does nervousness about the existence of an indelicate adjectival form of the word prompt people to avoid the correct word in such sentences as “Lady Wrothley saw to it that her ancestors’ portraits were properly hung”? Nevertheless, “hung” is correct except when capital punishment is being imposed.

HEAR/HERE

If you find yourself writing sentences like “I know I left my wallet hear!” you should note that “hear” has the word “ear” buried in it and let that remind you that it refers only to hearing and is always a verb (except when you are giving the British cheer “Hear! Hear!”). “I left my wallet here” is the correct expression.

HE DON’T/ HE DOESN’T

In formal English, “don’t” is not used in the third person singular. “I don’t like avocado ice cream” is correct, and so is “they don’t have their passports yet” and “they don’t have the sense to come in out of the rain”; but “he don’t have no money,” though common in certain dialects,

is nonstandard on two counts: it should be “he doesn’t” and “any money.” The same is true of other forms: “she don’t” and “it don’t” should be “she doesn’t” and “it doesn’t.”

HEIGHTH/HEIGHT

“Width” has a “TH” at the end, so why doesn’t “height”? In fact it used to, but the standard pronunciation today ends in a plain “T” sound. People who use the obsolete form misspell it as well, so pronunciation is no guide. By the way, this is one of those pesky exceptions to the rule, “I before E except after C,” but the vowels are seldom switched, perhaps because we see it printed on so many forms along with “age” and “weight.”

HELP THE PROBLEM

People say they want to help the problem of poverty when what they really mean is that they want to help solve the problem of poverty. Poverty flourishes without any extra help, thank you. I guess I know what a “suicide help line” is, but I’d rather it were a “suicide prevention help line.” I suppose it’s too late to ask people to rename alcoholism support groups as sobriety support groups, but it’s a shoddy use of language.

HERO/PROTAGONIST

In ordinary usage “hero” has two meanings: “leading character in a story” and “brave, admirable person.” In simple tales the two meanings may work together, but in modern literature and film the leading character or “protagonist” (a technical term common in literary criticism) may behave in a very unheroic fashion. Students who express shock that the “hero” of a play or novel behaves despicably reveal their inexperience. In literature classes avoid the word unless you mean to stress a character’s heroic qualities. However, if you are discussing the main character in a traditional opera, where values are often simple, you may get by with referring to the male lead as the “hero”—but is Don Giovanni really a hero?

See also “heroin/heroine.”

HEROIN/HEROINE

Heroin is a highly addictive opium derivative; the main character in a narrative is a heroine.

HIGHLY LOOKED UPON/HIGHLY REGARDED

Many people, struggling to come up with the phrase “highly regarded,” come up with the awkward “highly looked upon” instead; which suggests that the looker is placed in a high position, looking down, when what is meant is that the looker is looking up to someone or something admirable.

HIM, HER/HE, SHE

There is a group of personal pronouns to be used as subjects in a sentence, including “he,” “she,” “I,” and “we.” Then there is a separate group of object pronouns, including “him,” “her,” “me,” and “us.” The problem is that the folks who tend to mix up the two sets often don’t find the subject/object distinction clear or helpful, and say things like “Her and me went to the movies.”

A simple test is to substitute “us” for “her and me.” Would you say “us went to the movies?” Obviously not. You’d normally say “we went to the movies,” so when “we” is broken into the two persons involved it becomes “she and I went to the movies.”

But you would say “the murder scene scared us,” so it’s correct to say “the murder scene scared her and me.”

If you aren’t involved, use “they” and “them” as test words instead of “us” and “we.” “They won the lottery” becomes “he and she won the lottery,” and “the check was mailed to them” becomes “the check was mailed to him and her.”

See also “I/me/myself”

HIPPIE/HIPPY

A long-haired 60s flower child was a “hippie.” “Hippy” is an adjective describing someone with wide hips. The IE is not caused by a Y changing to IE in the plural as in “puppy” and “puppies.” It is rather a dismissive diminutive, invented by older, more sophisticated hipsters looking down on the new kids as mere “hippies.” Confusing these two is definitely unhip.

HISSELF/HIMSELF

In some dialects people say “hisself” for “himself,” but this is nonstandard.

AN HISTORIC/A HISTORIC

You should use “an” before a word beginning with an “H” only if the “H” is not pronounced: “an honest effort”; it’s properly “a historic event” though many sophisticated speakers somehow prefer the sound of “an historic,” so that version is not likely to get you into any real trouble.

HOARD/HORDE

A greedily hoarded treasure is a hoard. A herd of wildebeests or a mob of people is a horde.

HOI POLLOI

Hoi polloi is Greek for “the common people,” but it is often misused to mean “the upper class” (does “hoi” make speakers think of “high” or “hoity-toity”?). Some urge that since “hoi” is the article “the hoi polloi” is redundant; but the general rule is that articles such as “the” and “a” in foreign language phrases cease to function as such in place names, brands, and catch phrases except for some of the most familiar ones in French and Spanish, where everyone recognizes “la”—for instance—as meaning “the.” “The El Nino” is redundant, but “the hoi polloi” is standard English.

HOLD YOUR PEACE/SAY YOUR PIECE

Some folks imagine that since these expressions are opposites, the last word in each should be the same; but in fact they are unrelated expressions. The first means “maintain your silence,” and the other means literally “speak aloud a piece of writing” but is used to express the idea of making a statement.

HOLOCAUST

“Holocaust” is a Greek-derived translation of the Hebrew term “shoah,” which denotes a sort of ritual sacrifice in which the food offered is completely burnt up rather than being merely dedicated to God and then eaten. It was applied with bitter irony by Jews to the destruction of millions of their number in the Nazi death camps. Although phrases like “nuclear holocaust” and “Cambodian holocaust” have become common, you risk giving serious offense by using the word in less severe circumstances, such as calling a precipitous decline in stock prices a “sell-off holocaust.”

HOME PAGE

On the World Wide Web, a “home page” is normally the first page a person entering a site encounters, often functioning as a sort of table of contents for the other pages. People sometimes create special pages within their sites introducing a particular topic, and these are also informally called “home pages” (as in “The Emily Dickinson Home Page”); but it is a sure sign of a Web novice to refer to all Web pages as home pages.

HOMOPHOBIC

Some object to this word—arguing that it literally means “man-fearing,” but the “homo” in “homosexual” and in this word does not refer to the Latin word for “man,” but is derived from a Greek root meaning “same” while the “-phobic” means literally “having a fear of,” but in English has come to mean “hating.” “Homophobia” is now an established term for “prejudiced against homosexuals.”

HONE IN/HOME IN

You home in on a target (the center of the target is “home”). “Honing” has to do with sharpening knives, not aim.

HORS D’OEUVRES

If you knew only a little French, you might interpret this phrase as meaning “out of work,” but in fact it means little snack foods served before or outside of (“hors”) the main dishes of a meal (the “oeuvres”). English speakers have trouble mastering the sounds in this phrase, but it is normally rendered “or-DERVES,” in a rough approximation of the original. Mangled spellings like “hors’ dourves” are not uncommon. Actually, many modern food writers have decided we needn’t try to wrap our tongues around this peculiar foreign phrase and now prefer “starters.”

HOW COME/WHY

“How come?” is a common question in casual speech, but in formal contexts use “why?”

HYPHENATION

The Chicago Manual of Style contains a huge chart listing various sorts of phrases which are or are not to be hyphenated. Consult such a reference source for a thorough-going account of this matter, but you may be able to get by with a few basic rules. An adverb/adjective combination in which the adverb ends in “-LY” is never hyphenated: “His necktie reflected his generally grotesque taste.” Other sorts of adverbs are followed by a hyphen when combined with an adjective: “His long-suffering wife finally snapped and fed it through the office shredder.” The point here is that “long” modifies “suffering,” not “wife.” When both words modify the same noun, they are not hyphenated. A “light-green suitcase” is pale in color, but a “light green suitcase” is not heavy. In the latter example “light” and “green” both modify “suitcase,” so no hyphen is used.

Adjectives combined with nouns having an “-ED” suffix are hyphenated: “Frank was a hot-headed cop.”

Hyphenate ages when they are adjective phrases involving a unit of measurement: “Her ten-year-old car is beginning to give her trouble.” A girl can be a “ten-year-old” (“child” is implied). But there are no hyphens in such an adjectival phrase as “Her car is ten years old.” In fact, hyphens are generally omitted when such phrases follow the noun they modify except in phrases involving “all” or “self” such as “all-knowing” or “self-confident.” Fractions are almost always hyphenated when they are adjectives: “He is one-quarter Irish and three-quarters Nigerian.” But when the numerator is already hyphenated, the fraction itself is not, as in “ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths.” Fractions treated as nouns are not hyphenated: “He ate one quarter of the turkey.”

A phrase composed of a noun and a present participle (“-ing” word) must be hyphenated: “The antenna had been climbed by thrill-seeking teenagers who didn’t realize the top of it was electrified.”

These are the main cases in which people are prone to misuse hyphens. If you can master them, you will have eliminated the vast majority of

such mistakes in your writing. Some styles call for space around dashes (a practice of which I strongly disapprove), but it is never proper to surround hyphens with spaces, though in the following sort of pattern you may need to follow a hyphen with a space: “Follow standard pre- and post-operative procedures.”

HYPHENS & DASHES

Dashes are longer than hyphens, but since many browsers do not reliably interpret the code for dashes, they are usually rendered on the Web as they were on old-fashioned typewriters, as double hyphens—like that. Dashes tend to separate elements and hyphens to link them. Few people would substitute a dash for a hyphen in an expression like “a quick-witted scoundrel,” but the opposite is common. In a sentence like “Astrud—unlike Inger—enjoyed vacations in Spain rather than England,” one often sees hyphens incorrectly substituted for dashes.

When you are typing for photocopying or direct printing, it is a good idea to learn how to type a true dash instead of the double hyphen (computers differ). In old-fashioned styles, dashes (but never hyphens) are surrounded by spaces — like this. With modern computer output which emulates professional printing, this makes little sense. Skip the spaces unless your editor or teacher insists on them.

There are actually two kinds of dashes. The most common is the “em-dash” (theoretically the width of a letter “M”—but this is often not the case). To connect numbers, it is traditional to use an “en-dash” which is somewhat shorter, but not as short as a hyphen: “cocktails 5-7 pm.” All modern computers can produce en-dashes, but few people know how to type them. For most purposes you don’t have to worry about them, but if you are preparing material for print, you should learn how to use them.

HYPOCRITICAL

“Hypocritical” has a narrow, very specific meaning. It describes behavior which is intended to make one look better or more pious than one really is. It is often wrongly used to label people who are merely narrow-minded or genuinely pious. Do not confuse this word with “hyper-critical,” which describes people who are picky.

HYSTERICAL/HILARIOUS

People say of a bit of humor or a comical situation that it was “hysterical”—shorthand for “hysterically funny”—meaning “hilarious.” But when you speak of a man being “hysterical” it means he is having a fit of hysteria, and that may not be funny at all.

I/ME/MYSELF

In the old days when people studied traditional grammar, we could simply say, “The first person singular pronoun is ‘I’ when it’s a subject and ‘me’ when it’s an object,” but now few people know what that means. Let’s see if we can apply some common sense here. The misuse of “I” and “myself” for “me” is caused by nervousness about “me.” Educated people know that “Jim and me is goin’ down to slop the hogs,” is not elegant speech, not “correct.” It should be “Jim and I” because if I were slopping the hogs alone I would never say “Me is going . . .” So far so good. But the notion that there is something wrong with “me” leads people to overcorrect and avoid it where it is perfectly appropriate. People will say “The document had to be signed by both Susan and I” when the correct statement would be, “The document had to be signed by both Susan and me.” Trying even harder to avoid the lowly “me,” many people will substitute “myself,” as in “The suspect uttered epithets at Officer O’Leary and myself.” “Myself” is no better than “I” as an object. “Myself” is not a sort of all-purpose intensive form of “me” or “I.” Use “myself” only when you have used “I” earlier in the same sentence: “I am not particularly fond of goat cheese myself.” “I kept half the loot for myself.” All this confusion can easily be avoided if you just remove the second party from the sentences where you feel tempted to use “myself” as an object or feel nervous about “me.” You wouldn’t say, “The IRS sent the refund check to I,” so you shouldn’t say “The IRS sent the refund check to my wife and I” either. And you shouldn’t say “to my wife and myself.” The only correct way to say this is, “The IRS sent the refund check to my wife and me.” Still sounds too casual? Get over it.

On a related point, those who continue to announce “It is I” have traditional grammatical correctness on their side, but they are vastly outnumbered by those who proudly boast “It’s me!” There’s not much that can be done about this now. Similarly, if a caller asks for Susan and Susan answers “This is she,” her somewhat antiquated correctness is likely to startle the questioner into confusion.

-IC

In the Cold War era, anti-socialists often accused their enemies of being “socialistic” by which they meant that although they were not actually socialists, some of their beliefs were like those of socialists. But the “-ic” suffix is recklessly used in all kinds of settings, often without understanding its implications. Karl Marx was not “socialistic,” he was actually socialist.

IDEA/IDEAL

Any thought can be an idea, but only the best ideas worth pursuing are ideals.

IF I WAS/IF I WERE

The subjunctive mood, always weak in English, has been dwindling away for centuries until it has almost vanished. According to traditional thought, statements about the conditional future such as “If I were a carpenter . . .” require the subjunctive “were”; but “was” is certainly much more common. Still, if you want to impress those in the know with your usage, use “were.” The same goes for other pronouns: “you,” “she,” “he,” and “it.” In the case of the plural pronouns “we” and “they” the form “was” is definitely nonstandard, of course, because it is a singular form.

IGNORANT/STUPID

A person can be ignorant (not knowing some fact or idea) without being stupid (incapable of learning because of a basic mental deficiency). And those who say “that’s an ignorant idea” when they mean “stupid idea” are expressing their own ignorance.

ILLINOIS

The final “S” in “Illinois” is silent.

ILLUSION/ALLUSION

In that English paper, don’t write “literary illusions” when you mean “allusions.”

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION/VIRGIN BIRTH

The doctrine of “immaculate conception” (the belief that Mary was conceived without inheriting original sin) is often confused with the doctrine of the “virgin birth” (the belief that Mary gave birth to Jesus while remaining a virgin).

IMPACT

One (very large) group of people thinks that using “impact” as a verb is just nifty: “The announcement of yet another bug in the software will strongly impact the price of the company’s stock.” Another (very passionate) group of people thinks that “impact” should only be used as a noun and considers the first group to be barbarians. Although the first group may well be winning the usage struggle, you risk offending more people by using “impact” as a verb than you will by substituting more traditional words like “affect” or “influence.”

IMPERTINENT/IRRELEVANT

“Impertinent” looks as if it ought to mean the opposite of “pertinent,” and indeed it once did; but for centuries now its meaning in ordinary speech has been narrowed to “impudent,” specifically in regard to actions or speech toward someone regarded as socially superior. Only snobs and very old-fashioned people use “impertinent” correctly; most people would be well advised to forget it and use “irrelevant” instead to mean the opposite of “pertinent.”

IMPLY/INFER

These two words, which originally had quite distinct meanings, have become so blended together that most people no longer distinguish between them. If you want to avoid irritating the rest of us, use “imply” when something is being suggested without being explicitly stated and “infer” when someone is trying to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence. “Imply” is more assertive, active: I imply that you need to revise your paper; and, based on my hints, you infer that I didn’t think highly of your first draft.

IN REGARDS TO/WITH REGARD TO

Business English is deadly enough without scrambling it. “As regards your downsizing plan . . .” is acceptable, if stiff. “In regard to . . .” is also correct. But don’t confuse the two by writing “In regards to.”

IN THE FACT THAT/IN THAT

Many people mistakenly write “in the fact that” when they mean simply “in that” in sentences like “It seemed wiser not to go to work in the fact that the boss had discovered the company picnic money was missing.” Omit “the fact.” While we’re at it, “infact” is not a word; “in fact” is always a two-word phrase.

INCENT, INCENTIVIZE

Business folks sometimes use “incent” to mean “create an incentive,” but it’s not standard English. “Incentivize” is even more widely used, but strikes many people as an ugly substitute for “encourage.”

INCIDENCE/INCIDENTS/INSTANCES

These three overlap in meaning just enough to confuse a lot of people. Few of us have a need for “incidence,” which most often refers to degree or extent of the occurrence of something (“the incidence of measles in Whitman County has dropped markedly since the vaccine has been provided free”). “Incidents,” which is pronounced identically, is merely the plural of “incident,” meaning “occurrences” (“police reported damage to three different outhouses in separate incidents last Halloween”). Instances are examples (“semicolons are not required in the first three instances given in your query”). Incidents can be used as instances only if someone is using them as examples.

INCREDIBLE

The other day I heard a film reviewer praise a director because he created “incredible characters,” which would literally mean unbelievable characters. What the reviewer meant to say, of course, was precisely the opposite: characters so lifelike as to seem like real people. Intensifiers and superlatives tend to get worn down quickly through overuse and become almost meaningless, but it is wise to be aware of their root meanings so that you don’t unintentionally utter absurdities. “Fantastic” means “as in a fantasy” just as “fabulous” means “as in a fable.” A “wonderful” sight should make you pause in wonder (awe). Some of these words are worn down beyond redemption, however. For instance, who now expects a “terrific” sight to terrify?

INDEPTH/IN DEPTH

You can make an “in-depth” study of a subject by studying it “in depth,” but never “indepth.” Like “a lot” this is two words often mistaken for one. The first, adjectival, use of the phrase given above is commonly hyphenated, which may lead some people to splice the words even more closely together. “Indepth” is usually used as an adverb by people of limited vocabulary who would be better off saying “profoundly” or “thoroughly.” Some of them go so far as to say that they have studied a subject “indepthly.” Avoid this one if you don’t want to be snickered at.

INDIAN/NATIVE AMERICAN

Although academics have long promoted “Native American” as a more accurate label than “Indian” most of the people so labeled continue to refer to themselves as “Indians” and prefer that term. In Canada, there is a move to refer to descendants of the original inhabitants as “First Peoples,” but so far that has not spread to the U.S.

UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA

There is no such place as “the University of Indiana”; it’s “Indiana University.”

I should know; I went there.

INDIVIDUAL/PERSON

Law-enforcement officers often use “individual” as a simple synonym for “person” when they don’t particularly mean to stress individuality: “I pursued the individual who had fired the weapon at me for three blocks.” This sort of use of “individual” lends an oddly formal air to your writing. When “person” works as well, use it.

INFAMOUS/NOTORIOUS

“Infamous” means famous in a bad way. It is related to the word “infamy.” Humorists have for a couple of centuries jokingly used the word in a positive sense, but the effectiveness of the joke depends on the listener knowing that this is a misuse of the term. Because this is a very old joke indeed you should stick to using “infamous” only of people like Hitler and Billy the Kid.

“Notorious” means the same thing as “infamous” and should also only be used in a negative sense.

INFACT/IN FACT

“In fact” is always two words.

INFINITE

When Shakespeare’s Enobarbus said of Cleopatra that “age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety” he was obviously exaggerating. So few are the literal uses of “infinite” that almost every use of it is metaphorical. There is not an infinite number of possible positions on a chessboard, nor number of stars in the universe. To say of snowflakes that the possible variety of their shape is infinite is incorrect: surely one could theoretically calculate the maximum possible size of something one could justly call a “snowflake,” calculate the number of molecules possible in that volume, and the number of possible arrangements of those molecules. The result would be a very large number, but not an infinity. Things can be innumerable (in one sense of the word) without being infinite; in other words, things which are beyond the human capacity to count them can still be limited in number. “Infinite” has its uses as a loose synonym for “a very great many,” but it is all too often lazily used when one doesn’t want to do the work to discover the order of magnitude involved. When you are making quasi-scientific statements you do a disservice to your reader by implying infinity when mere billions are involved.

INFLAMMABLE

“Inflammable” means the same thing as “flammable”: burnable, capable of being ignited or inflamed. So many people mistake the “in-” prefix as a negative, however, that it has been largely abandoned as a warning label.

INPUT

Some people object to “input” as computer jargon that’s proliferated unjustifiably in the business world. Be aware that it’s not welcome in all settings; but whatever you do, don’t misspell it “imput.”

INSTALL/INSTILL

People conjure up visions of themselves as upgradable robots when they write things like “My Aunt Tillie tried to install the spirit of giving in my heart.” The word they are searching for is “instill.” You install equipment, you instill feelings or attitudes.

INSTANCES/INSTANTS

Brief moments are “instants,” and examples of anything are “instances.”

INTENSE/INTENSIVE

If you are putting forth an intense effort, your work is “intense”: “My intense study of Plato convinced me that I would make a good leader.” But when the intensity stems not so much from your effort as it does from outside forces, the usual word is “intensive”: “the village endured intensive bombing.”

INTENSIFIERS

People are always looking for ways to emphasize how really, really special the subject under discussion is. (The use of “really” is one of the weakest and least effective of these.) A host of words has been worn down in this service to near-meaninglessness. It is good to remember the etymological roots of such words to avoid such absurdities as “fantastically realistic,” “absolutely relative,” and “incredibly convincing.” When you are tempted to use one of these vague intensifiers consider rewriting your prose to explain more precisely and vividly what you mean: “Fred’s cooking was incredibly bad” could be changed to “When I tasted Fred’s cooking I almost thought I was back in the middle-school cafeteria.” (See also “Incredible.”)

INTERESTING

The second syllable is normally silent in “interesting.” It’s nonstandard to go out of your way to pronounce the “ter,” and definitely substandard to say “innaresting.”

INTERFACE/INTERACT

The use of the computer term “interface” as a verb, substituting for “interact,” is widely objected to.

INTERMENT/INTERNMENT

Interment is burial; internment is merely imprisonment.

INTERNET/INTRANET

“Internet” is the proper name of the network most people connect to, and the word needs to be capitalized. However “intranet,” a network confined to a smaller group, is a generic term which does not deserve capitalization. In advertising, we often read things like “unlimited Internet, \$19.” It would be more accurate to refer in this sort of context to “Internet access.”

INTERPRETATE/INTERPRET

“Interpretate” is mistakenly formed from “interpretation,” but the verb form is simply “interpret.” See also “orientate.”

INTO/IN TO

“Into” is a preposition which often answers the question, “where?” For example, “Tom and Becky had gone far into the cave before they realized they were lost.” Sometimes the “where” is metaphorical, as in “he went into the army” or “she went into business.” It can also refer by analogy to time: “the snow lingered on the ground well into April.” In old-fashioned math talk, it could be used to refer to division: “two into six is three.” In other instances where the words “in” and “to” just happen to find themselves neighbors, they must remain separate words. For instance, “Rachel dived back in to rescue the struggling boy.” Here “to” belongs with “rescue” and means “in order to,” not “where.” (If the phrase had been “dived back into the water,” “into” would be required.)

Try speaking the sentence concerned aloud, pausing distinctly between “in” and “to.” If the result sounds wrong, you probably need “into.”

Then there is the 60s colloquialism which lingers on in which “into” means “deeply interested or involved in”: “Kevin is into baseball cards.” This is derived from usages like “the committee is looking into the fund-raising scandal.” The abbreviated form is not acceptable formal English, but is quite common in informal communications.

IRONICALLY/COINCIDENTALLY

An event that is strikingly different from or the opposite of what one would have expected, usually producing a sense of incongruity, is ironic: “The sheriff proclaimed a zero-tolerance policy on drugs, but ironically flunked his own test.” Other striking comings-together of events lacking these qualities are merely coincidental: “the lovers leapt off the tower just as a hay wagon coincidentally happened to be passing below.”

IRREGARDLESS/REGARDLESS

Regardless of what you have heard, “irregardless” is a redundancy. The suffix “-less” on the end of the word already makes the word negative. It doesn’t need the negative prefix “ir-” added to make it even more negative.

IS, IS

In speech, people often lose track in the middle of a sentence and repeat “is” instead of saying “that”: “The problem with the conflict in the Balkans is, is the ethnic tensions seem exacerbated by everything we do.” This is just a nervous tic, worth being alert against when you’re speaking publicly.

Of course, I suppose it all depends on what you think the meaning of “is” is.

ISLAM/MUSLIMS

Followers of Islam are called “Muslims,” not “Islams.” (Although the Associated Press still does not accept it, “Muslim” is now widely preferred over the older and less phonetically accurate “Moslem.”)

ISREAL/ISRAEL

To remember how to spell “Israel” properly, try pronouncing it the way Israelis do when they’re speaking English: “ISS-rah-el.”

ISSUES/PROBLEMS

In many circles people speak of “having issues” when they mean they have problems with some issue or objections of some kind. Traditionalists are annoyed by this.

ITCH/SCRATCH

Strictly speaking, you scratch an itch. If you’re trying to get rid of a tingly feeling on your back scratch it, don’t itch it.

ITS/IT'S

The exception to the general rule that one should use an apostrophe to indicate possession is in possessive pronouns. Some of them are not a problem. “Mine” has no misleading “s” at the end to invite an apostrophe. And few people are tempted to write “hi’s,” though the equally erroneous “her’s” is fairly common, as are “our’s” and “their’s”—all wrong, wrong, wrong. The problem with avoiding “it’s” as a possessive is that this spelling is perfectly correct as a contraction meaning “it is.” Just remember two points and you’ll never make this mistake again. (1) “It’s” always means “it is” or “it has” and nothing else. (2) Try changing the “its” in your sentence to “his” and if it doesn’t make sense, then go with “it’s.”

JEW/JEWISH

“Jew” as an adjective (“Jew lawyer”) is an ethnic insult; the word is “Jewish.” But people who object to “Jew” as a noun are being oversensitive. Most Jews are proud to be called Jews. The expression “to Jew someone down”—an expression meaning “to bargain for a lower price”—reflects a grossly insulting stereotype and should be avoided in all contexts.

JEWELRY

To remember the American pronunciation, just say “jewel” and add “-ree” on the end. “Jool-er-ee” is British. And the British spelling is much fancier: “jewellery.”

JOHN HENRY/JOHN HANCOCK

John Hancock signed the Declaration of Independence so flamboyantly that his name became a synonym for “signature.” Don’t mix him up with John Henry, who was a steel-drivin’ man.

JUDGEMENT/JUDGMENT

In Great Britain and many of its former colonies, “judgement” is still the correct spelling; but ever since Noah Webster decreed the first E superfluous, Americans have omitted it. Many of Webster’s crotchets have faded away (each year fewer people use the spelling “theater,” for instance); but even the producers of Terminator 2: Judgment Day, chose the traditional American spelling. If you write “judgement” you should also write “colour,” “tyre,” and “gaol.”

KICK-START/JUMP-START

You revive a dead battery by jolting it to life with a jumper cable: an extraordinary measure used in an emergency. So if you hope to stimulate a foundering economy, you want to jump-start it. Kick-starting is just the normal way of getting a motorcycle going.

KOALA BEAR/KOALA

A koala is not a bear. People who know their marsupials refer to them simply as “koalas.”

LAISSEZ-FAIRE

The mispronunciation “lazy-fare” is almost irresistible in English, but this is a French expression meaning “let it be” or, more precisely, “the economic doctrine of avoiding state regulation of the economy,” and it has retained its French pronunciation (though with an English R): “lessay fare.” It is most properly used as an adjective, as in “laissez-faire capitalism,” but is also commonly used as if it were a noun phrase: “the Republican party advocates laissez faire.”

LARGE/IMPORTANT

In colloquial speech it’s perfectly normal to refer to something as a “big problem,” but when people create analogous expressions in writing, the result is awkward. Don’t write “this is a large issue for our firm” when what you mean is “this is an important issue for our firm.” Size and intensity are not synonymous.

LAST NAME/FAMILY NAME

Now that few people know what a “surname” is, we usually use the term “last name” to designate a family name; but in a host of languages the family name comes first. “Julius” was the family name of Julius Caesar, and “Kawabata” was the family name of author Kawabata Yasunari. For Asians, this situation is complicated because publishers and immigrants often switch names to conform to Western practice, so you’ll find most of Kawabata’s books in an American bookstore by looking under “Yasunari Kawabata.” It’s safer with international names to write “given name” and “family name” rather than “first name” and “last name.”

LATE/FORMER

If you want to refer to your former husband, don’t call him your “late husband” unless he’s dead.

LATER/LATTER

Except in the expression “latter-day” (modern), the word “latter” usually refers back to the last-mentioned of a set of alternatives. “We gave the kids a choice of a vacation in Paris, Rome, or Disney World. Of course the latter was their choice.” In other contexts not referring back to such a list, the word you want is “later.”

LAY/LIE

You lay down the book you’ve been reading, but you lie down when you go to bed. If the subject is acting on some other object, it’s “lay.” If the subject is lying down, then it’s “lie.” This distinction is often not made in informal speech, partly because in the past tense the words sound much more alike: “He lay down for a nap” but “he laid down the law.” If the subject is already at rest, you might “let it lie.”

LEACH/LEECH

Water leaches chemicals out of soil or color out of cloth, your brother-in-law leeches off the family by constantly borrowing money to pay his gambling debts (he behaves like a bloodsucking leech).

LEAD/LED

When you’re hit over the head, the instrument could be a “lead” pipe. But when it’s a verb, “lead” is the present and “led” is the past tense. The problem is that the past tense is pronounced exactly like the above-mentioned plumbing material (“plumb” comes from a word meaning “lead”), so people confuse the two. In a sentence like “She led us to the scene of the crime,” always use the three-letter spelling.

LEAVE/LET

The colloquial use of “leave” to mean “let” in phrases like “leave me be” is not standard. “Leave me alone” is fine, though.

LEGEND/MYTH

Myths are generally considered to be traditional stories whose importance lies in their significance, like the myth of the Fall in Eden; whereas legends can be merely famous deeds, like the legend of Davy Crockett. In common usage “myth” usually implies fantasy. Enrico Caruso was a legendary tenor, but Hogwarts is a mythical school. Legends may or may not be true. But be cautious about using “myth” to mean “untrue story” in a mythology, theology, or literature class, where teachers can be quite touchy about insisting that the true significance of a myth lies not in its factuality but in its meaning for the culture which produces or adopts it.

LENSE/LENS

Although the variant spelling “lense” is listed in some dictionaries, the standard spelling for those little disks that focus light is “lens.”

LIABLE/LIBEL

If you are likely to do something you are liable to do it; and if a debt can legitimately be charged to you, you are liable for it. A person who defames you with a false accusation libels you. There is no such word as “lible.”

LIBRARY/LIBRARY

The first R in “library” is often slurred or omitted in speech, and it sometimes drops out in writing as well; and “librarian” is often turned into “libarian.”

LIGHT-YEAR

“Light-year” is always a measure of distance rather than of time; in fact it is the distance that light travels in a year. “Parsec” is also a measure of distance, equaling 3.26 light-years, though the term was used incorrectly as a measure of time by Han Solo in “Star Wars.”

LIGHTED/LIT

Don’t fret over the difference between these two words; they’re interchangeable.

LIKE

Since the 1950s, when it was especially associated with hipsters, “like” as a sort of meaningless verbal hiccup has been common in speech. The earliest uses had a sort of sense to them in which “like” introduced feelings or perceptions which were then specified: “When I learned my poem had been rejected I was, like, devastated.” However, “like” quickly migrated elsewhere in sentences: “I was like, just going down the road, when, like, I saw this cop, like, hiding behind the billboard.” This habit has spread throughout American society, affecting people of all ages. Those who have the irritating “like” habit are usually unaware of it, even if they use it once or twice in every sentence: but if your job involves much speaking with others, it’s a habit worth breaking.

Recently young people have extended its uses by using “like” to introduce thoughts and speeches: “When he tells me his car broke down on the way to my party I’m like, ‘I know you were with Cheryl because she told me so.’” To be reacted to as a grown-up, avoid this pattern.

(See also “goes.”)

LIKE/AS IF

“As if” is generally preferred in formal writing over “like” in sentences such as “the conductor looks as if he’s ready to begin the symphony.” But in colloquial speech, “like” prevails, and when recording expressions such as “he spends money like it’s going out of style” it would be artificial to substitute “as if.” And in expressions where the verb is implied rather than expressed, “like” is standard rather than “as”: “she took to gymnastics like a duck to water.”

LIKE FOR/LIKE

I would like you to remember that saying “I’d like for you to take out the garbage” is not formal English. The “for” is unnecessary.

LIQUOR

Although it may be pronounced “likker,” you shouldn’t spell it that way, and it’s important to remember to include the “U” when writing the word.

LISTSERV

“LISTSERV” is the brand name of one kind of electronic mail-handling software for distributing messages to a list of subscribers. Other common brand names are “Majordomo” and “Listproc”. You can subscribe to the poodle-fluffing list, but not the LISTSERV. People at my university, where only Listproc is used, often (and erroneously) refer to themselves as managers of “listservs.” English teachers are frequently tripped up when typing “listserv” as part of a computer command; they naturally want to append an E on the end of the word. According to L-Soft, the manufacturer of LISTSERV, the name of their software should always be capitalized. See their Web site for the details: <http://www.lsoft.com/manuals/1.8d/user/user.html#1.1>

“LITE” SPELLING

Attempts to “reform” English spelling to render it more phonetic have mostly been doomed to failure—luckily for us. These proposed changes, if widely adopted, would make old books difficult to read and obscure etymological roots which are often a useful guide to meaning. A few, like “lite” for “light,” “nite” for “night,” and “thru” for “through” have attained a degree of popular acceptance, but none of these should be used in formal writing. “Catalog” has become an accepted substitute for “catalogue,” but I don’t like it and refuse to use it. “Analog” has triumphed in technical contexts, but humanists are still more likely to write “analogue.”

LITERALLY

Like “incredible,” “literally” has been so overused as a sort of vague intensifier that it is in danger of losing its literal meaning. It should be used to distinguish between a figurative and a literal meaning of a phrase. It should not be used as a synonym for “actually” or “really.” Don’t say of someone that he “literally blew up” unless he swallowed a stick of dynamite.

LIVED

In expressions like “long-lived” pronouncing the last part to rhyme with “dived” is more traditional, but rhyming it with “sieved” is so common that it’s now widely acceptable.

LOSE/LOOSE

This confusion can easily be avoided if you pronounce the word intended aloud. If it has a voiced Z sound, then it’s “lose.” If it has a hissy S sound, then it’s “loose.” Here are examples of correct usage: “He tends to lose his keys.” “She lets her dog run loose.” Note that when “lose” turns into “losing” it loses its “E.”

LUSTFUL/LUSTY

“Lusty” means “brimming with vigor and good health” or “enthusiastic.” Don’t confuse it with “lustful,” which means “filled with sexual desire.”

MANTLE/MANTEL

Though they stem from the same word, a “mantle” today is usually a cloak, while the shelf over a fireplace is most often spelled “mantel.”

MARITAL/MARTIAL

“Marital” refers to marriage, “martial” to war, whose ancient god was Mars. These two are often swapped, with comical results.

MARSHALL/MARSHAL

You may write “the Field Marshal marshalled his troops,” but you cannot spell his title with a double “L.” A marshal is always a marshal, never a marshall.

MASS/MASSIVE

When the dumb Coneheads on Saturday Night Live talked about consuming “mass quantities” of beer they didn’t know any better, but native Earth humans should stick with “massive” unless they are trying to allude to SNL. “Mass” is often used by young people in expressions where “many” or even the informal “a lot of” would be more appropriate.

MAUVE

“Mauve” (a kind of purple) is pronounced to rhyme with “grove,” not “mawv.”

MAY/MIGHT

Most of the time “might” and “may” are almost interchangeable, with “might” suggesting a somewhat lower probability. You’re more likely to get wet if the forecaster says it may rain than if she says it might rain; but substituting one for the other is unlikely to get you into trouble—so long as you stay in the present tense.

But “might” is also the past tense of the auxiliary verb “may,” and is required in sentences like “Chuck might have avoided arrest for the robbery if he hadn’t given the teller his business card before asking for the money.” When speculating that events might have been other than

they were, don't substitute "may" for "might."

As an aside: if you are an old-fashioned child, you will ask "may I go out to play?" rather than "can I go out to play?" Despite the prevalence of the latter pattern, some adults still feel strongly that "may" has to do with permission whereas "can" implies only physical ability. But then if you have a parent like this you've had this pattern drilled into your head long before you encountered this page.

MEDAL/METAL/MEDDLE/METTLE

A person who proves his or her mettle displays courage or stamina. The word "mettle" is seldom used outside of this expression, so people constantly confuse it with other similar-sounding words.

MEDIA/MEDIUM

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in A are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, "criteria" and "data." Radio is a broadcast medium. Television is another broadcast medium. Newspapers are a print medium. Together they are media. Following the tendency of Americans to abbreviate phrases, with "transistor radio" becoming "transistor," (now fortunately obsolete) and "videotape" becoming "video," "news media" and "communications media" have been abbreviated to "media." Remember that watercolor on paper and oil on black velvet are also media, though they have nothing to do with the news. When you want to get a message from your late Uncle Fred, you may consult a medium. The word means a vehicle between some source of information and the recipient of it. The "media" are the transmitters of the news; they are not the news itself.

MEDIEVAL AGES/MIDDLE AGES

The "eval" of "Medieval" means "age" so by saying "Medieval Ages" you are saying "Middle Ages Ages." Medievalists also greatly resent the common misspelling "Midevil."

MEDIOCRE

Although some dictionaries accept the meaning of this word as "medium" or "average," in fact its connotations are almost always more negative. When something is distinctly not as good as it could be, it is mediocre. If you want to say that you are an average student, don't proclaim yourself mediocre, or you'll convey a worse impression of yourself than you intend.

MEDIUM/MEDIAN

That strip of grass separating the lanes going opposite directions in the middle of a freeway is a median.

MEMORIUM/MEMORIAM

The correct spelling of the Latin phrase is "in memoriam."

MIC/MIKE

Until very recently the casual term for a microphone was "mike," not "mic." Young people now mostly imitate the technicians who prefer the shorter "mic" label on their soundboards, but it looks distinctly odd to those used to the traditional term. There are no other words in English in which "-ic" is pronounced to rhyme with "bike"—that's the reason for the traditional "mike" spelling in the first place.

MISCHIEVIOUS/MISCHIEVOUS

The correct pronunciation of this word is "MISS-chuh-vuss," not "miss-CHEE-vee-uss." Don't let that mischievous extra "I" sneak into the word.

MISNOMER

A misnomer is mistake in naming a thing; calling a debit card a "credit card" is a misnomer. Do not use the term more generally to designate other sorts of confusion, misunderstood concepts, or fallacies, and above all do not render this word as "misnamer."

MORAL/MORALE

If you are trying to make people behave properly, you are policing their morals; if you are just trying to keep their spirits up, you are trying to maintain their morale. "Moral" is accented on the first syllable, "morale" on the second.

MORE IMPORTANTLY/MORE IMPORTANT

When speakers are trying to impress audiences with their rhetoric, they often seem to feel that the extra syllable in "importantly" lends weight to their remarks: "and more importantly, I have an abiding love for the American people." However, these pompous speakers are wrong. It is rarely correct to use this form of the phrase because it is seldom adverbial in intention. Say "more important" instead. The same applies to "most importantly"; it should be "most important."

MORESO/MORE SO

"More so" should always be spelled as two distinct words.

MOST ALWAYS/ALMOST ALWAYS

"Most always" is a casual, slangy way of saying "almost always." The latter expression is better in writing.

MOTION/MOVE

When you make a motion in a meeting, say simply “I move,” as in “I move to adjourn”; and if you’re taking the minutes, write “Barbara moved,” not “Barbara motioned” (unless Barbara was making wild arm-waving gestures to summon the servers to bring in the lunch). Instead of “I want to make a motion” it’s simpler and more direct to say “I want to move.”

MUCH DIFFERENTLY/VERY DIFFERENTLY

Say “We consistently vote very differently,” not “much differently.” But you can say “My opinion doesn’t much differ from yours.”

MUSIC/SINGING

After my wife—an accomplished soprano—reported indignantly that a friend of hers had stated that her church had “no music, only singing,” I began to notice the same tendency among my students to equate music strictly with instrumental music. I was told by one that “the singing interfered with the music” (i.e., the accompaniment). In the classical realm most listeners seem to prefer instrumental to vocal performances, which is odd given the distinct unpopularity of strictly instrumental popular music. People rejoice at the sound of choral works at Christmas but seldom seek them out at other times of the year. Serious music lovers rightly object to the linguistic sloppiness that denies the label “music” to works by such composers as Palestrina, Schubert, and Verdi. From the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century, vocal music reigned supreme, and instrumentalists strove to achieve the prized compliment of “sounding like the human voice.” The dominance of orchestral works is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

In contrast, my students often call instrumental works “songs,” being unfamiliar with the terms “composition” and “piece.” All singing is music, but not all music is singing.

MUTE POINT/MOOT POINT

“Moot” is a very old word related to “meeting,” specifically a meeting where serious matters are discussed. Oddly enough, a moot point can be a point worth discussing at a meeting (or in court)—an unresolved question—or it can be the opposite: a point already settled and not worth discussing further. At any rate, “mute point” is simply wrong.

MYRIAD OF/MYRIAD

Some traditionalists object to the word “of” after “myriad” or an “a” before, though both are fairly common in formal writing. The word is originally Greek, meaning 10,000, but now usually means “a great many.” Its main function is as a noun, and the adjective derived from it shows its origins by being reluctant to behave like other nouns expressing amount, like “ton” as in “I’ve got a ton of work to do.” In contrast: “I have myriad tasks to complete at work.”

NAUSEATED/NAUSEOUS

Many people say, when sick to their stomachs, that they feel “nauseous” (pronounced “NOSH-uss” or “NOZH-uss”) but traditionalists insist that this word should be used to describe something that makes you want to throw up: something nauseating. They hear you as saying that you make people want to vomit, and it tempers their sympathy for your plight. Better to say you are “nauseated,” or simply that you feel like throwing up. Note that the English use “sick” exclusively for vomiting; when Americans say they feel sick, the English say they feel ill. Americans visiting Great Britain who tell their hosts they feel sick may cause them to worry needlessly about the carpeting.

NEICE/NIECE

Many people have trouble believing that words with the “ee” sound in them should be spelled with an “IE.” The problem is that in English (and only in English), the letter I sounds like “aye” rather than “ee,” as it does in the several European languages from which we have borrowed a host of words. If you had studied French in high school you would have learned that this word is pronounced “knee-YES” in that language, and it would be easier to remember. Americans in particular misspell a host of German-Jewish names because they have trouble remembering that in that language IE is pronounced “ee” and EI is pronounced “aye.” The possessors of such names are inconsistent about this matter in English. “Wein” changes from “vine” to “ween,” but “Klein” remains “kline.”

NEVADA

“Nuh-VAH-duh” is a little closer to the original Spanish pronunciation than the way Nevadans pronounce the name of their home state, but the correct middle syllable is the same “A” sound as in “sad.” When East Coast broadcasters use the first pronunciation, they mark themselves as outsiders.

NIEVE/NAIVE

People who spell this French-derived word “nieve” make themselves look naive. In French there is also a masculine form: “naif”; and both words can be nouns meaning “naive person” as well as adjectives. “Nieve” is actually the Spanish word for “snow.” “Naivete” is the French spelling of the related noun in English.

If you prefer more nativized spelling, “naivety” is also acceptable.

EIGHTEEN HUNDREDS/NINETEENTH CENTURY

“Eighteen hundreds,” “sixteen hundreds” and so forth are not exactly errors; the problem is that they are used almost exclusively by people who are nervous about saying “nineteenth century” when, after all, the years in that century begin with the number eighteen. This should be simple: few people are unclear about the fact that this is the twenty-first century even though our dates begin with twenty. Just be consistent about adding one to the second digit in a year and you’ve got the number of its century. It took a hundred years to get to the year 100, so the

next hundred years, which are named “101,” “102,” etc. were in the second century. This also works BC. The four hundreds BC are the fifth century BC. Using phrases like “eighteen hundreds” is a signal to your readers that you are weak in math and history alike.

NO SOONER WHEN/NO SOONER THAN

The phrase “no sooner had Paula stopped petting the cat when it began to yowl” should be instead “no sooner had Paula stopped petting the cat than it began to yowl.”

NOT HARDLY/NOT AT ALL

“Not hardly” is slang, fine when you want to be casual—but in a formal document? Not hardly!

NONPLUSSED

“Nonplussed” means to be stuck, often in a puzzling or embarrassing way, unable to go further (“non”=“no” + “plus”=“further”). It does not mean, as many people seem to think, “calm, in control.”

NOONE/NO ONE

Shall we meet at Ye Olde Sandwyche Shoppe at Noone? “No one” is always two separate words, unlike “anyone” and “someone.”

NOTORIOUS

“Notorious” means famous in a bad way, as in “Nero was notorious for giving long recitals of his tedious poetry.” Occasionally writers deliberately use it in a positive sense to suggest irony or wit, but this is a very feeble and tired device. Nothing admirable should be called “notorious.”

NUCLEAR

This isn’t a writing problem, but a pronunciation error. President Eisenhower used to consistently insert a “U” sound between the first and second syllables, leading many journalists to imitate him and say “nuk-yuh-lar” instead of the correct “nuk-lee-ar.” The confusion extends also to “nucleus.” Many people can’t even hear the mistake when they make it, and only scientists and a few others will catch the mispronunciation; but you lose credibility if you are an anti-nuclear protester who doesn’t know how to pronounce “nuclear.” Here’s one way to remember: we need a new, clear understanding of the issues; let’s stop saying “Nuke you!”

NUMBER OF VERB

In long, complicated sentences, people often lose track of whether the subject is singular or plural and use the wrong sort of verb. “The ultimate effect of all of these phone calls to the detectives were to make them suspicious of the callers” is an error because “effect,” which is singular, is the subject. If you are uncertain about whether to go with singular or plural condense the sentence down to its skeleton: “The effect . . . was make them suspicious.”

Another situation that creates confusion is the use of interjections like “along with,” “as well as,” and “together with,” where they are often treated improperly as if they meant simply “and.” “Aunt Hilda, as well as her pet dachshund, is coming to the party” (not “are coming”).

NUMBERS

If your writing contains numbers, the general rule is to spell out in letters all the numbers from zero to ten and use numerals for larger numbers; but there are exceptions. If what you’re writing is full of numbers and you’re doing math with them, stick with numerals. Approximations like “about thirty days ago” and catch-phrases like “his first thousand days” are spelled out. Large round numbers are often rendered thus: “50 billion sold.” With measurements, use numerals: “4 inches long.” Never start a sentence with a numeral. Either spell out the number involved or rearrange the sentence to move the number to a later position.

See also “50’s.”

NUPTIAL/NUPTIAL

“Nuptial” is usually a pretentious substitute for “wedding,” but if you’re going to use it, be sure to spell it properly.

OF

“Of” is often shoved in where it doesn’t belong in phrases like “not that big of a deal,” and “not that great of a writer.” Just leave it out.

OF ____’S

Phrases combining “of” with a noun followed by “’s” may seem redundant, since both indicate possession; nevertheless, “a friend of Karen’s” is standard English, just as much as “a friend of Karen” or “Karen’s friend.”

OFFENSE/OFFENCE

In the US “offense” is standard; in the U.K. use “offence.” The sports pronunciation accenting the first syllable should not be used when discussing military, legal, or other sorts of offense.

OFTEN

People striving for sophistication often pronounce the “T” in this word, but true sophisticates know that the masses are correct in saying “often.”

OK/OKAY

This may be the most universal word in existence; it seems to have spread to most of the world’s languages, though we’re not really certain where it comes from. “OK” without periods is the most common form in written American English now, though “okay” is not incorrect.

OLD FASHION/OLD-FASHIONED

Although “old fashion” appears in advertising a good deal, the traditional spelling is “old-fashioned.”

OLD-TIMER’S DISEASE/ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

I’ve always thought that “old-timer’s disease” was a clever if tasteless pun on “Alzheimer’s Disease”; but many people have assured me that this is a common and quite unintentional error.

ON ACCIDENT/BY ACCIDENT

Although you can do things on purpose, you do them by accident.

ONCE AND A WHILE/ONCE IN A WHILE

The expression is “once in a while.”

ONE OF THE (SINGULAR)

In phrases like “pistachio is one of the few flavors that appeals to me,” use the singular form for the verb “appeals” because its subject is “one,” not “flavors.”

ONE-DIMENSIONAL/TWO-DIMENSIONAL

Once upon a time most folks knew that “three-dimensional” characters or ideas were rounded, fleshed out, complex, and “two-dimensional” ones were flat and uninteresting. It seems that the knowledge of basic geometry has declined in recent years, because today we hear such characters and ideas described as “one-dimensional.” According to Euclid, no object can be one-dimensional (of course, according to modern physics, even two-dimensionality is only an abstract concept). If you are still bothered by the notion that two dimensions are one too many, just use “flat.”

ONE IN THE SAME/ONE AND THE SAME

The old expression “they are one and the same” is now often mangled into the roughly phonetic equivalent “one in the same.” The use of “one” here to mean “identical with each other” is familiar from phrases like “Jane and John act as one.” They are one, they are the same.

ONE OF THE ONLY/ONE OF THE FEW

“Only” has its root in “one,” as should be obvious from looking at it. But we lose sight of this because of phrases like “only a few” and “only some,” which lead in turn to the mistaken “one of the only.” “The only” always refers to one item only; so the correct expression is “one of the few.” Compare with the similarly mistaken “very unique.”

ONLY

Writers often inadvertently create confusion by placing “only” incorrectly in a sentence. It should go immediately before the word or phrase which it modifies. “I lost my only shirt” means that I had but one to begin with. “I lost only my shirt” means I didn’t lose anything else. “Only I lost my shirt” means that I was the only person in my group to lose a shirt. Strictly speaking, “I only lost my shirt” should mean I didn’t destroy it or have it stolen—I just lost it; but in common speech this is usually understood as being identical with “I lost only my shirt.” Scrutinize your uses of “only” to make sure you are not creating unwanted ambiguities.

ONTO/ON TO

“Onto” and “on to” are often interchangeable, but not always. Consider the effect created by wrongly using “onto” in the following sentence when “on to” is meant: “We’re having hors d’oeuvres in the garden, and for dinner moving onto the house.” If the “on” is part of an expression like “moving on” it can’t be shoved together with a “to” that just happens to follow it.

OPPRESS/REPRESS

Dictatorships commonly oppress their citizens and repress dissent, but these words don’t mean exactly the same thing. “Repress” just means “keep under control.” Sometimes repression is a good thing: “During the job interview, repress the temptation to tell Mr. Brown that he has toilet paper stuck to his shoe.” Oppression is always bad, and implies serious persecution.

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

Many pretentious writers have begun to use the expression “orders of magnitude” without understanding what it means. The concept derives from the scientific notation of very large numbers in which each order of magnitude is ten times the previous one. When the bacteria in a flask have multiplied from some hundreds to some thousands, it is very handy to say that their numbers have increased by an order of magnitude,

and when they have increased to some millions, that their numbers have increased by four orders of magnitude.

Number language generally confuses people. Many seem to suppose that a 100% increase must be pretty much the same as an increase by an order of magnitude, but in fact such an increase represents merely a doubling of quantity. A “hundredfold increase” is even bigger: one hundred times as much. If you don’t have a firm grasp on such concepts, it’s best to avoid the expression altogether. After all, “Our audience is ten times as big now as when the show opened” makes the same point more clearly than “Our audience has increased by an order of magnitude.”

Compare with “quantum leap.”

ORDINANCE/ORDNANCE

A law is an ordinance, but a gun is a piece of ordnance.

ORGANIC

The word “organic” is used in all sorts of contexts, often in a highly metaphorical manner; but the subject here is its use in the phrase “organic foods” in claims to superior healthfulness. Various jurisdictions have various standards for “organic” food; but generally the label is applied to foods which have been grown without artificial chemicals or pesticides. Literally, of course, the term is a redundancy: all food is composed of organic chemicals (complex chemicals containing carbon). There is no such thing as an inorganic food (unless you count water as a food). Natural fertilizers and pesticides may or may not be superior to artificial ones, but the proper distinction is not between organic and inorganic. Many nitrogen-fixing plants like peas do a great job of fertilizing the soil with plain old inorganic atmospheric nitrogen.

When it comes to nutrition, people are quick to generalize rashly from a narrow scientific basis. After a few preservatives were revealed to have harmful effects in some consumers, many products were proudly labelled “No Preservatives!” I don’t want harmful preservatives in my food, but that label suggests to me a warning: “Deteriorates quickly! May contain mold and other kinds of rot!” Salt is a preservative.

ORIENTAL/ASIAN

“Oriental” is generally considered old-fashioned now, and many find it offensive. “Asian” is preferred, but not “Asiatic.” If you know the nationality involved, it’s better to write “Chinese” or “Indian.” “Asian” is often taken to mean exclusively “East Asian,” which irritates South Asian and Central Asian people.

ORIENTATE/ORIENT

Although some dictionaries have now begun to accept it, “orientate” was mistakenly formed from “orientation,” but the verb form is simply “orient.” Similarly, “disorientated” is an error for “disoriented.” See also “interpretate.”

OSTENSIVELY/OSTENSIBLY

This word, meaning “apparently,” is spelled “ostensibly.”

OVER-EXAGGERATED/EXAGGERATED

“Over-exaggerated” is a redundancy. If something is exaggerated, it’s already overstressed.

OVERDO/OVERDUE

If you overdo the cocktails after work you may be overdue for your daughter’s soccer game at 6:00.

OVERSEE/OVERLOOK

When you oversee the preparation of dinner, you take control and manage the operation closely. But if you overlook the preparation of dinner you forget to prepare the meal entirely—better order pizza.

PAIR (NUMBER)

“This is a left-handed pair of scissors.” “There is a pair of glasses on the mantelpiece.” “Pair” is singular in this sort of expression. Note that we say “that is a nice pair of pants” even though we also say “those are nice pants.”

PALATE/PALETTE/PALLET

Your “palate” is the roof of your mouth, and by extension, your sense of taste. A “palette” is that flat board which an artist mixes paint on. A “pallet” is either a bed (now rare) or a flat platform onto which goods are loaded.

PARALLEL/SYMBOL

Beginning literature students often write sentences like this: “He uses the rose as a parallel for her beauty” when they mean “a symbol for her beauty.” If you are taking a literature class, it’s good to master the distinctions between several related terms relating to symbolism. An eagle clutching a bundle of arrows and an olive branch is a symbol of the U.S. government in war and peace.

Students often misuse the word “analogy” in the same way. An analogy has to be specifically spelled out by the writer, not simply referred to: “My mother’s attempts to find her keys in the morning were like early expeditions to the South Pole: prolonged and mostly futile.”

A metaphor is a kind of symbolism common in literature. When Shakespeare writes “That time of year thou mayst in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/Upon those boughs which shake against the cold” he is comparing his aging self to a tree in late autumn,

perhaps even specifically suggesting that he is going bald by referring to the tree shedding its leaves. This autumnal tree is a metaphor for the human aging process.

A simile resembles a metaphor except that “like” or “as” or something similar is used to make the comparison explicitly. Byron admires a dark-haired woman by saying of her “She walks in beauty, like the night/Of cloudless climes and starry skies.” Her darkness is said to be like that of the night.

An allegory is a symbolic narrative in which characters may stand for abstract ideas, and the story convey a philosophy. Allegories are no longer popular, but the most commonly read one in school is Dante’s Divine Comedy in which the poet Virgil is a symbol for human wisdom, Dante’s beloved Beatrice is a symbol of divine grace, and the whole poem tries to teach the reader how to avoid damnation. Aslan in C. S. Lewis’ Narnia tales is an allegorical figure meant to symbolize Christ: dying to save others and rising again.

PARALLELLED/PARALLELED

In British English two pairs of parallel “L”s are a handy spelling reminder, but in American English the spelling of the past tense of “parallel” is “paralleled.” The same pattern holds for British “paralleling” and American “paralleling.”

PARALLELISM IN A SERIES

When you use a number of phrases in a series separated by commas or conjunctions they must all have the same grammatical form. “They loved mountain-climbing, to gather wild mushrooms, and first aid practice” should be corrected to something like this: “They loved to climb mountains, gather wild mushrooms, and practice first aid” (all three verbs are dependent on that initial “to”). Fear of being repetitious often leads writers into awkward inconsistencies when creating such series.

PARALYZATION/PARALYSIS

Some people derive the noun “paralyzation” from the very “paralyze,” but the proper term is “paralysis.”

PARAMETERS/PERIMETERS

When parameters were spoken of only by mathematicians and scientists, the term caused few problems; but now that it has become widely adopted by other speakers, it is constantly confused with “perimeters.” A parameter is a quantity or constant which varies depending on the instance being examined. The parameters of distance between the axles of a car and its turning radius are related. The perimeter of something is its boundary. The two words shade into each other because we often speak of factors of an issue or problem being parameters, simultaneously thinking of them as limits; but this is to confuse two distinct, if related ideas. A safe rule is to avoid using “parameters” altogether unless you are confident you know what it means.

PARENTHESES

The most common error in using parenthesis marks (besides using them too much) is to forget to enclose the parenthetical material with a final, closing parenthesis mark. The second most common is to place concluding punctuation incorrectly. The simplest sort of example is one in which the entire sentence is enclosed in parentheses. (Most people understand that the final punctuation must remain inside the closing parenthesis mark, like this.) More troublesome are sentences in which only a clause or phrase is enclosed in parentheses. Normally a sentence’s final punctuation mark—whether period, exclamation point, or question mark—goes outside such a parenthesis (like this). However, if the material inside the parenthesis requires a concluding punctuation mark like an exclamation point or question mark (but not a period!), that mark is placed inside the closing mark even though another mark is outside it. This latter sort of thing is awkward, however, and best avoided if you can help it.

For some reason, many writers have begun to omit the space before a parenthetical page citation, like this:(p. 17). Always preserve the space, like this: (p. 17).

PARLIMENT/PARLIAMENT

Americans unfamiliar with parliamentary systems often mistakenly leave the second “A” out of “parliament” and “parliamentary.”

PASSED/PAST

If you are referring to time or distance, use “past”: “the team performed well in the past,” “the police car drove past the suspect’s house.” If you are referring to the action of passing, however, you need to use “passed”: “when John passed the gravy, he spilled it on his lap,” “the teacher was astonished that none of the students had passed the test.”

PASSIVE VOICE

There are legitimate uses for the passive voice: “this absurd regulation was of course written by a committee.” But it’s true that you can make your prose more lively and readable by using the active voice much more often. “the victim was attacked by three men in ski masks” isn’t nearly as striking as “three men in ski masks attacked the victim.” The passive voice is often used to avoid taking responsibility for an action: “my term paper was accidentally deleted” avoids stating the truth: “I accidentally deleted my term paper.” Over-use of passive constructions is irritating, though not necessarily erroneous. But it does lead to real clumsiness when passive constructions get piled on top of each other: “no exception in the no-pets rule was sought to be created so that angora rabbits could be raised in the apartment” can be made clearer by shifting to the active voice: “the landlord refused to make an exception to the no-pets rule to allow Eliza to raise angora rabbits in the apartment.”

PAST TIME/PASTIME

An agreeable activity like knitting with which you pass the time is your pastime. Spell it as one word, with one “S.”

PEACE/PIECE

It’s hard to believe many people really confuse the meaning of these words; but the spellings are frequently swapped, probably out of sheer carelessness. “Piece” has the word “pie” buried in it, which should remind you of the familiar phrase, “a piece of pie.” You can meditate to find peace of mind, or you can get angry and give someone a piece of your mind. Classical scholars will note that “pax” is the Latin word for peace, suggesting the need for an “A” in the latter word.

PEAK/PEEK/PIQUE

It is tempting to think that your attention might be aroused to a high point by “peaking” your curiosity; but in fact, “pique” is a French word meaning “prick,” in the sense of “stimulate.” The expression has nothing to do with “peek,” either. Therefore the expression is “my curiosity was piqued.”

PEASANT/PHEASANT

When I visited the former Soviet Union I was astonished to learn that farmworkers were still called “peasants” there. In English-speaking countries we tend to think of the term as belonging strictly to the feudal era. However you use it, don’t confuse it with “pheasant,” a favorite game bird. Use the sound of the beginning consonants to remind you of the difference: pheasants are food, peasants are people.

PENULTIMATE/NEXT TO LAST

To confuse your readers, use the learned term “penultimate,” which means “next to last,” but which most people assume means “the very last.” And if you really want to baffle them, use “antepenultimate” to mean “third from the end.”

PEOPLES

In the Middle Ages “peoples” was not an uncommon word, but later writers grew wary of it because “people” has a collective, plural meaning which seemed to make “peoples” superfluous. It lived on in the sense of “nations” (“the peoples of the world”) and from this social scientists (anthropologists in particular) derived the extended meaning “ethnic groups” (“the peoples of the upper Amazon Basin”). However, in ordinary usage “people” is usually understood to be plural, so much so that in the bad old days when dialect humor was popular having a speaker refer to “you peoples” indicated illiteracy. If you are not referring to national or ethnic groups, it is better to avoid “peoples” and use “people.”

See also “behaviors.”

PER/ACCORDING TO

Using “per” to mean “according to” as in “ship the widgets as per the instructions of the customer” is rather old-fashioned business jargon, and is not welcome in other contexts. “Per” is fine when used in phrases involving figures like “miles per gallon.”

PERCENT DECREASE

When something has been reduced by one hundred percent, it’s all gone (or if the word refers to price, it’s free). You can’t properly speak of reducing anything by more than a hundred percent.

PERNICKETY/PERSNICKETY

The original Scottish dialect form was “pernickety,” but Americans changed it to “persnickety” a century ago, and “pernickety” is generally unknown in the U.S. though it’s still in wide use across the Atlantic.

PEROGATIVE/PREROGATIVE

“Prerogative” is frequently both mispronounced and misspelled as “perogative.” It may help to remember that the word is associated with PRivileges of PRecedence.

PERPETUATE/PERPRETRATE

“Perpetrate” is something criminals do (criminals are sometimes called “perps” in cop slang). When you seek to continue something you are trying to perpetuate it.

PERSE/PER SE

This legal term meaning “in, of, or by itself”) is a bit pretentious, but you gain little respect if you misspell per se as a single word. Worse is the mistaken “per say.”

PERSONAL/PERSONNEL

Employees are personnel, but private individuals considered separately from their jobs are persons.

PERSPECTIVE/PROSPECTIVE

“Perspective” has to do with sight, as in painting, and is usually a noun. “Prospective” generally has to do with the future (compare with “What are your prospects, young man?”) and is usually an adjective. But beware: there is also a rather old-fashioned but fairly common meaning of the word “prospect” which has to do with sight: “as he climbed the mountain, a vast prospect opened up before him.”

PERSECUTE/PROSECUTE

When you persecute someone, you’re treating them badly, whether they deserve it or not; but only legal officers can prosecute someone for a crime.

PERSONAL/PERSONNEL

Employees are personnel, but private individuals considered separately from their jobs have personal lives.

PERSONALITY

In show business personalities are people famous for being famous (mostly popular actors and singers); people with more substantial accomplishments like distinguished heads of state and Nobel Prize winners should not be referred to as “personalities” even when they appear on the Tonight Show.

PERUSE

This word, which means “examine thoroughly” is often misused instead to mean “glance over hastily.” Although some dictionaries accept the latter meaning, it is not traditional.

PHENOMENA/PHENOMENON

There are several words with Latin or Greek roots whose plural forms ending in “A” are constantly mistaken for singular ones. See, for instance, “criteria” and “media” and “data.” It’s “this phenomenon,” but “these phenomena.”

PHILIPPINES/FILIPINOS

The people of the Philippines are called “Filipinos.” Don’t switch the initial letters of these two words.

PHYSICAL/FISCAL

In budget matters, it’s the fiscal year, relating to finances with an “F.”

PICARESQUE/PICTURESQUE

“Picaresque” is a technical literary term you are unlikely to have a use for. It labels a sort of literature involving a picaresque (Spanish), a lovable rogue who roams the land having colorful adventures. A landscape that looks as lovely as a picture is picturesque.

PICTURE

The pronunciation of “picture” as if it were “pitcher” is common in some dialects, but not standard. The first syllable should sound like “pick.”

PIN number/PIN

Those who object to “PIN number” on the grounds that the N in “PIN” stands for “number” in the phrase “personal identification number” are quite right, but it may be difficult to get people to say anything else. “PIN” was invented to meet the objection that a “password” consisting of nothing but numbers is not a word. Pronouncing each letter of the acronym as “P-I-N” blunts its efficiency. Saying just “PIN” reminds us of another common English word, though few people are likely to think when they are told to “enter PIN” that they should shove a steel pin into the terminal they are operating. In writing, anyway, PIN is unambiguous and should be used without the redundant “number.”

The same goes for “VIN number”; “VIN” stands for “Vehicle Identification Number.” And “UPC code” is redundant because “UPC” stands for “Universal Product Code.”

PLAYWRITE/PLAYWRIGHT

It might seem as if a person who writes plays should be called a “playwrite”; but in fact a playwright is a person who has wrought words into a dramatic form, just as a wheelwright has wrought wheels out of wood and iron. All the other words ending in “-wright” are archaic, or we’d be constantly reminded of the correct pattern.

PLEAD INNOCENT

Lawyers frown on the phrase “plead innocent” (it’s “plead guilty” or “plead not guilty”); but outside of legal contexts the phrase is standard English.

PLEASE RSVP/ PLEASE REPLY

R.S.V.P. stands for the French phrase “Repondez s’il vous plait” (“reply, please”), so it doesn’t need an added “please.” However, since few people seem to know its literal meaning, and fewer still take it seriously, it’s best to use plain English: “Please reply.” And for those of you receiving such an invitation: yes, you have to let the host know whether you’re coming or not, and no, you can’t bring along the kids or other uninvited guests.

PLUG-IN/OUTLET

That thing on the end of an electrical cord is a plug, which goes into the socket of the wall outlet.

POINT BEING IS THAT

“The point being is that” is redundant; say just “the point is that” or “the point being that.”

POINT IN TIME

This redundancy became popular because it was used by astronauts seeking to distinguish precisely between a point in time and a point in space. Since most people use the expression in contexts where there is no ambiguity, it makes more sense to say simply “at this point” or “at this time.”

PODIUM/LECTERN

Strictly speaking, a podium is a raised platform on which you stand to give a speech; the piece of furniture on which you place your notes and behind which you stand is a lectern.

POLE/POLL

A pole is a long stick. You could take a “poll” (survey or ballot) to determine whether voters want lower taxes or better education.

POMPOM/POMPON

To most people that fuzzy ball on the top of a knit hat and the implement wielded by a cheerleader are both “pompoms,” but to traditionalists they are “pompons,” spelled the way the French—who gave us the word—spell it. A pompom, say these purists, is only a sort of large gun. Though you’re unlikely to bother many people by falling into the common confusion, you can show off your education by observing the distinction.

POPULACE/POPULOUS

The population of a country may be referred to as its populace, but a crowded country is populous.

PORE/POUR

When used as a verb, “pore” has the unusual sense of “scrutinize,” as in “She pored over her receipts.” If it’s coffee or rain, the stuff pours.

POSSESSED OF/POSSESSED BY/POSSESSED WITH

If you own yacht, you’re possessed of it. If a demon takes over your body, you’re possessed by it. If that which possesses you is more metaphorical, like an executive determined to get ahead, he or she can be possessed by or with the desire to win.

PRACTICE/PRACTISE

In the United Kingdom, “practice” is the noun, “practise” the verb; but in the U.S. the spelling “practice” is commonly used for both, though the distinction is sometimes observed. “Practise” as a noun is, however, always wrong in both places: a doctor always has a “practice,” never a “practise.”

PRACTICLE/PRACTICAL

Some words end in “-icle” and others in “-ical” without the result being any difference in pronunciation. But when you want somebody really practical, call on good old AL.

PRAY/PREY

If you want a miracle, pray to God; but if you’re a criminal you prey on your victims. Incidentally, it’s “praying mantis,” not “preying mantis.” The insect holds its forefeet in a position suggesting prayer.

PRECEDE/PROCEED

“Precede” means “to go before.” “Proceed” means to go on. Let your companion precede you through the door, then proceed to follow her. Interestingly, the second E is missing in “procedure.”

PRECEDENCE/PRECEDENTS

Although these words sound the same, they work differently. The pop star is given precedence over the factory worker at the entrance to the dance club. “Precedents” is just the plural of “precedent”: “If we let the kids adopt that rattlesnake as a pet and agree to let them take it for a walk in Death Valley, we’ll be setting some bad precedents.”

PRECIPITATE/PRECIPITOUS

Both of these adjectives are based on the image of plunging over the brink of a precipice, but “precipitate” emphasizes the suddenness of the plunge, “precipitous,” the steepness of it. If you make a “precipitate” decision, you are making a hasty and probably unwise one. If the stock market declines “precipitously,” it goes down sharply.

PREDOMINATE/PREDOMINANT

“Predominate” is a verb: “In the royal throne room, the color red predominates.” “Predominant” is an adjective: “The predominant view among the touts is that Fancy Dancer is the best bet in the third race.”

PREDOMINATELY/PREDOMINANTLY

“Predominantly” is formed on the adjective “predominant,” not the verb “predominate.”

PREEMPTORY/PEREMPTORY

“Peremptory” (meaning “imperative”) is often misspelled and mispronounced “preemptory” through confusion caused by the influence of the verb “preempt,” whose adjectival form is actually “preemptive.” “Preemptory” exists only as an obscure legal term you’re not likely to have use for.

PREJUDICE/PREJUDICED

People not only misspell “prejudice” in a number of ways, they sometimes say “he’s prejudice” when they mean “he’s prejudiced.”

See also “bias/biased.”

PREMIER/PREMIERE

These words are, respectively, the masculine and feminine forms of the word for “first” in French; but they have become differentiated in English. Only the masculine form is used as an adjective, as in “Tidy-Pool is the premier pool-cleaning firm in Orange County.” The confusion arises when these words are used as nouns. The prime minister of a parliamentary government is known as a “premier.” The opening night of a film or play is its “premiere.”

“Premiere” as a verb is common in the arts and in show business (“the show premiered on PBS”), but it is less acceptable in other contexts (“the state government premiered its new welfare system”). Use “introduced,” or, if real innovation is involved, “pioneered.”

PREMISE/PREMISES

Some people suppose that since “premises” has a plural form, a single house or other piece of property must be a “premise,” but that word is reserved for use as a term in logic meaning something assumed or taken as given in making an argument. Your lowly one-room shack is still your premises.

PREPONE

South Asian speakers have evolved the logical word “prepone” to mean the opposite of “postpone”: to move forward in time. It’s a handy word, but users of it should be aware that those unfamiliar with their dialect will be baffled by this word.

PREPOSITIONS (REPEATED)

In the sentence “Alex liked Nancy, with whom he shared his Snickers bar with” only one “with” is needed—eliminate either one. Look out for similarly duplicated prepositions.

Incidentally, an often-cited example of this pattern is from Paul McCartney’s “Live and Let Die”: “In this ever-changing world in which we live in”; but if you listen closely, you’ll hear instead a quite correct “In this ever-changing world in which we’re livin’.” Americans have a hard time hearing the soft British “R” in “we’re.”

PREPOSITIONS (WRONG)

One of the clearest indications that a person reads little and doesn’t hear much formal English is a failure to use the right preposition in a common expression. You aren’t ignorant to a fact; you’re ignorant of it. Things don’t happen on accident, but by accident (though they do happen “on purpose”). There are no simple rules governing preposition usage: you just have to immerse yourself in good English in order to write it naturally.

See also “different than/different from/to.”

PRESCRIBE/PROSCRIBE

You recommend something when you prescribe it, but you forbid it when you proscribe it. The usually positive function of “pro-” confuses many people.

PRESENTLY/CURRENTLY

Some argue that “presently” doesn’t mean “in the present.” It means “soon.” If you want to talk about something that’s happening right now, they urge you to say it’s going on currently.

PRETTY/SOMEWHAT

It’s pretty common to use “pretty” to mean “somewhat” in ordinary speech; but it should be avoided in formal writing, where sometimes “very” is more appropriate. The temptation to use “pretty” usually indicates the writer is being vague, so changing to something more specific may be an even better solution: “a pretty bad mess” might be “chocolate syrup spilled all over the pizza which had been dumped upside down on the carpet.”

PRIMER

When this word is used in the U.S. to mean “elementary textbook” it is pronounced with a short “I”: “primer” (rhymes with “dimmer”). All other meanings are pronounced with a long “I”: “prymer” (rhymes with “timer”).

PRINCIPAL/PRINCIPLE

Generations of teachers have tried to drill this one into students’ heads by reminding them, “The principal is your pal.” Many don’t seem convinced. “Principal” is a noun and adjective referring to someone or something which is highest in rank or importance. (In a loan, the principal is the more substantial part of the money, the interest is—or should be—the lesser.) “Principle” is only a noun, and has to do with law or doctrine: “The workers fought hard for the principle of collective bargaining.”

PRIORITIZE

Many people disdain “prioritize” as bureaucratic jargon for “rank” or “make a high priority.”

PRIORITY

It is common to proclaim “in our business, customer service is a priority,” but it would be better to say “a high priority,” since priorities can also be low.

PROACTIVE

See “reactionary/reactive.”

PROBABLY

The two Bs in this word are particularly difficult to pronounce in sequence, so the word often comes out as “proably” and is even occasionally misspelled that way. When even the last B disappears, the pronunciation “proolly” suggests drunken slurring or, at best, an attempt at humor.

AS TIME PROGRESSED/AS TIME PASSED

Events may progress in time, but time itself does not progress—it just passes.

PRONE/SUPINE

“Prone” (face down) is often confused with “supine” (face up). “Prostrate” technically also means “face down,” but is most often used to mean simply “devastated.”

See also “prostate/prostrate.”

PROPHECY/PROPHECY

“Prophecy,” the noun, (pronounced “PROF-a-see”) is a prediction. The verb “to prophesy” (pronounced “PROF-a-sigh”) means to predict something. When a prophet prophesies he or she utters prophecies.

PRONOUNCIATION/PRONUNCIATION

“Pronounce” is the verb, but the “O” is omitted for the noun: “pronunciation.” This mistake ranks right up there in incongruity with “writting.”

PROSTATE/PROSTRATE

The gland men have is called the prostate. “Prostrate” is an adjective meaning “lying face downward.”

PROTRAY/PORTRAY

There are a lot of words in English that begin in “pro-.” This is not one of them. When you make a portrait, you portray someone.

PROVED/PROVEN

For most purposes either form is a fine past tense of “prove,” though in a phrase like “a proven talent” where the word is an adjective preceding a noun, “proven” is standard.

PURPOSELY/PURPOSEFULLY

If you do something on purpose (not by accident), you do it purposely. But if you have a specific purpose in mind, you are acting purposefully.

Q/G

See “G/Q.”

QUANTUM LEAP

The thing about quantum leaps is that they mark an abrupt change from one state to a distinctly different one, with no in-between transitional states being possible; but they are not large. In fact, in physics a quantum leap is one of the smallest sorts of changes worth talking about. Leave “quantum leap” to the subatomic physicists unless you know what you’re talking about.

QUEUE

If you're standing in a queue you'll have plenty of time to ponder the unusual spelling of this word. Remember, it contains two "U's."

QUIET/QUITE

This is probably caused by a slip of the fingers more often than by a slip of the mental gears, but one often sees "quite" (very) substituted for "quiet" (shhh!). This is one of those common errors your spelling checker will not catch, so look out for it.

QUOTE

A passage doesn't become a quote (or—better—"quotation") until you've quoted it. The only time to refer to a "quote" is when you are referring to someone quoting something. When referring to the original words, simply call it a passage.

QUOTATION MARKS

The examples below are set off in order to avoid confusion over the use of single and double quotation marks.

There are many ways to go wrong with quotation marks. They are often used ironically:

She ran around with a bunch of "intellectuals."

The quotation marks around "intellectuals" indicate that the writer believes that these are in fact so-called intellectuals, not real intellectuals at all. The ironic use of quotation marks is very much overdone, and is usually a sign of laziness indicating that the writer has not bothered to find the precise word or expression necessary.

Advertisers unfortunately tend to use quotation marks merely for emphasis:

"FRESH" TOMATOES 59 CENTS A POUND

The influence of the more common ironic usage tends to make the reader question whether these tomatoes are really fresh. Underlining, bold lettering, all caps—there are several less ambiguous ways to emphasize words than placing them between quotation marks.

In American usage, single quotation marks are used normally only for quoted words and phrases within quotations. British usage tends to reverse this relationship, with single quotation marks (or "inverted commas") being standard and double ones being used only for quotations within quotations. Single quotation marks are also used in linguistic, phonetic, and philosophical studies to surround words and phrases under discussion; but the common practice of using single quotation marks for short phrases and words and double ones for complete sentences is otherwise an error.

Block quotations like this should not be surrounded by any quotation marks at all (though a passage this short should not be rendered as a block quotation; you need at least three lines of verse or five lines of prose to justify block quotation).

When quoting a long passage involving more than one paragraph, quotation marks go at the beginning of each paragraph, but at the end of only the final one. Dialogue in which the speaker changes with each paragraph has each speech enclosed in its own quotation marks.

Titles of books and other long works which might be printed as books are usually italicized (except, for some reason, in newspapers); but the titles of short poems, stories, essays, and other works which would be more commonly printed within larger works (anthologies, collections, periodicals, etc.) are enclosed in quotation marks.

There are different patterns for regulating how quotation marks relate to other punctuation. Find out which one your teacher or editor prefers and use it, or choose one of your own liking, but stick to it consistently. According to the "Chicago Manual of Style," commas are placed inside quotation marks:

I spent the morning reading Faulkner's "Barn Burning," which seemed to be about a pyromaniac.

Periods are also normally placed inside quotation marks (with the exception of terms being defined (see above). Colons and semicolons, however, are preceded by quotation marks.

If the quoted matter ends with a question mark or exclamation point, it is placed inside the quotation marks:

John asked, "When's dinner?"

But if it is the enclosing sentence which asks the question, then the question mark comes after the quotation marks:

What did she mean, John wondered, by saying "as soon as you make it"?

Similarly:

Fred shouted, "Look out for the bull!"

but

When I was subsequently gored, all Timmy said was "this is kinda boring"!

Finally, I must lament that many standard character sets, including ASCII and basic HTML, lack true quotation marks which curl to enclose the quoted matter, substituting instead ugly "inch" or "ditto" marks. As far as I am concerned, there is not a single proper quotation mark on this page. Some browsers can translate the code for a true quotation mark (and true, curled apostrophes), but many cannot.

RACISM

The “C” in “racism” and “racist” is pronounced as a simple “S” sound, Don’t confuse it with the “SH” sound in “racial.”

RACK/WRACK

If you are racked with pain or you feel nerve-racked, you are feeling as if you were being stretched on that Medieval instrument of torture, the rack. You rack your brains when you stretch them vigorously to search out the truth like a torturer. “Wrack” has to do with ruinous accidents, so if the stock market is wracked by rumors of imminent recession, it’s wrecked.

RAN/RUN

Computer programmers have been heard to say “the program’s been ran,” when what they mean is “the program’s been run.”

RAPPORT

Many more people hear this word, meaning “affinity,” than read it, judging by the popularity of various popular misspellings such as “rapore” and “rapoire.” If you get along really well with someone, the two of you have rapport.

RATIO

A ratio is a way of expressing the relationship between one number and another. If there is one teacher to fifty students, the teacher/student ratio is one to fifty, and the student/teacher ratio would be fifty to one. If a very dense but wealthy prince were being tutored by fifty teachers, the teacher/student ratio would be fifty to one, and the student/teacher ratio would be one to fifty. As you can see, the order in which the numbers are compared is important.

The ratios discussed so far are “high”—the difference between the numbers is large. The lowest possible ratio is one to one: one teacher to one student. If you are campaigning for more individual attention in the classroom, you want a higher number of teachers, but a lower student/teacher ratio.

RATIONALE/RATIONALIZATION

When you’re explaining the reasoning behind your position, you’re presenting your rationale. But if you’re just making up some lame excuse to make your position appear better—whether to yourself or others—you’re engaging in rationalization.

RAVAGING/RAVISHING/RAVENOUS

To ravage is to pillage, sack, or devastate. The only time “ravaging” is properly used is in phrases like “when the pirates had finished ravaging the town, they turned to ravishing the women.” Which brings us to “ravish”: meaning to rape, or rob violently. A trailer court can be ravaged by a storm (nothing is stolen, but a lot of damage is done) but not ravished. The crown jewels of Ruritania can be ravished (stolen using violence) without being ravaged (damaged).

To confuse matters, people began back in the fourteenth century to speak metaphorically of their souls being “ravished” by intense spiritual or esthetic experiences. Thus we speak of a “ravishing woman” (the term is rarely applied to men) today not because she literally rapes men who look at her but because her devastating beauty penetrates their hearts in an almost violent fashion. Despite contemporary society’s heightened sensitivity about rape, we still remain (perhaps fortunately) unconscious of many of the transformations of the root meaning in words with positive connotations such as “rapturous.”

Originally, “raven” as a verb was synonymous with “ravish” in the sense of “to steal by force.” One of its specialized meanings became “devour,” as in “the lion ravened her prey.” By analogy, hungry people became “ravenous” (as hungry as beasts), and that remains the only common use of the word today.

If a woman smashes your apartment up, she ravages it. If she looks stunningly beautiful, she is ravishing. If she eats the whole platter of hors d’oeuvres you’ve set out for the party before the other guests come, she’s ravenous.

REACTIONARY/REACTIVE

Many people incorrectly use “reactionary” to mean “acting in response to some outside stimulus.” That’s “reactive.” “Reactionary” actually has a very narrow meaning; it is a noun or adjective describing a form of looking backward that goes beyond conservatism (wanting to prevent change and maintain present conditions) to reaction—wanting to recreate a lost past. The advocates of restoring Czarist rule in Russia are reactionaries. While we’re on the subject, the term “proactive” formed by analogy with “reactive” seems superfluous to many of us. Use “active,” “assertive,” or “positive” whenever you can instead.

REAL/REALLY

The correct adverbial form is “really” rather than “real”; but even that form is generally confined to casual speech, as in “When you complimented me on my speech I felt really great!” To say “real great” instead moves the speaker several steps downscale socially. However “really” is a feeble qualifier. “Wonderful” is an acceptable substitute for “really great” and you can give a definite upscale slant to your speech by adopting the British “really quite wonderful.” Usually, however, it is better to replace the expression altogether with something more precise: “almost seven feet tall” is better than “really tall.” To strive for intensity by repeating “really” as in “that dessert you made was really, really good” demonstrates an impoverished vocabulary.

REALTOR

For some reason, this word is often mispronounced as “real-a-ter” instead of the proper “ree-ul-ter.” Incidentally, realtors insist that this is a term trademarked by the National Association of Real Estate Boards, that it must be capitalized, and that all non-members of that association are mere real estate agents. Common usage, however, normally ignores the distinction, despite their protests.

REASON BECAUSE

We often hear people say things like, “the reason there’s a hole in the screen door is because I tripped over the cat on my way out.” The phrase “is because” should be “is that.” If you wanted to use “because,” the sentence should be phrased, “There’s a hole in the screen door because I tripped over the cat.” Using both is a redundancy, as is the common expression “the reason why.” “The reason being is” should be simply “the reason being.”

REBELLING/REVOLTING

Even though “rebel” and “revolt” mean more or less the same thing, people who are revolting are disgusting, not taking up arms against the government.

REBUT/REFUTE

When you rebut someone’s argument you argue against it. To refute someone’s argument is to prove it incorrect. Unless you are certain you have achieved success, use “rebut.”

RECENT/RESENT

There are actually three words to distinguish here. “Recent,” always pronounced with an unvoiced hissy S and with the accent on the first syllable, means “not long ago,” as in, “I appreciated your recent encouragement.” “Resent” has two different meanings with two different pronunciations, both with the accent on the second syllable. In the most common case, where “resent” means “feel bad about,” the word is pronounced with a voiced Z sound: “I resent your implication that I gave you the chocolates only because I was hoping you’d share them with me.” In the less common case, the word means “to send again,” and is pronounced with an unvoiced hissy S sound: “The e-mail message bounced, so I resent it.” So say the intended word aloud. If the accent is on the second syllable, “resent” is the spelling you need.

RECOGNIZE

In sloppy speech, this often comes out “reck-uh-nize.” Sound the “G.”

RECREATE/REINVENT

The expression “no need to reinvent the wheel” loses much of its wit when “recreate” is substituted for the original verb. While we’re at it, “recreate” does not mean “to engage in recreation.” If you play basketball, you may be exercising, but you’re not recreating.

RECUPERATE/RECoup

If you are getting over an illness, you are recuperating; but if you insist on remaining at the roulette table when your luck has been running against you, you are seeking to recoup your losses.

REDUNDANCIES

There are many examples of redundancies in these pages: phrases which say twice what needs to be said only once, like “past history.” Advertisers are particularly liable to redundancy in hyping their offers: “as an added bonus” (as a bonus), “preplan” (plan), and “free gift” (but look out for the shipping charges!). Two other common redundancies which are clearly errors are “and plus” (plus) and “end result” (result). But some other redundancies are contained in phrases sanctioned by tradition: “safe haven,” “hot water heater,” “new beginning,” and “tuna fish.”

REEKING HAVOC/WREAKING HAVOC

“Reeking” means “smelling strongly,” so that can’t be right. The phrase simply means “working great destruction.” “Havoc” has always referred to general destruction in English, but one very old phrase incorporating the word was “cry havoc,” which meant to give an army the signal for pillage. To “play havoc with” means the same thing as to “wreak havoc.” Avoid as well the mistaken “wreck havoc.”

REGARD/REGARDS

Business English is deadly enough without scrambling it. “As regards your downsizing plan . . .” is acceptable, if stiff. “In regard to” “and with regard to” are also correct. But “in regards to” is nonstandard. You can also convey the same idea with “in respect to” or “with respect to.”

REGRETFULLY/REGRETTABLY

Either word can be used as an adverb to introduce an expression of regret, though conservatives prefer “regrettably” in sentences like “Regrettably, it rained on the 4th of July.” However, within a sentence “regretfully” may be used only to describe the manner in which someone does something: “John had to regretfully decline his beloved’s invitation to go hang-gliding because he was terrified of heights.” If no specified person in the sentence is doing the regretting, but the speaker is simply asserting “it is to be regretted,” the word is “regrettably”: “Their boss is regrettably stubborn.”

REIGN/REIN

A king or queen reigns, but you rein in a horse. The expression “to give rein” means to give in to an impulse as a spirited horse gives in to its impulse to gallop when you slacken the reins. Similarly, the correct expression is “free rein,” not “free reign.”

RELIGION

Protestants often refer to “the Catholic religion.” Catholicism is a faith or a church. (Only Protestants belong to “denominations.”) Both Catholics and Protestants follow the Christian religion.

RELIGION BELIEVES/RELIGION TEACHES

People often write things like “Buddhism believes” when they mean to say “Buddhism teaches,” or “Buddhists believe.” Religions do not believe, they are the objects of belief.

RELUCTANT/RETICENT

“Reticent” denotes only reluctance to speak; do not use it for any other form of reluctance.

REMOTELY CLOSE

“Not even remotely close” is a fine example of an oxymoron. An idea can be “not even remotely correct,” but closeness and remoteness are opposites; and it doesn’t make sense to have one modify the other. There are lots of lists of oxymorons on the Web, but they mostly mix jokey editorializing (“military intelligence” and “Microsoft Works”) with true oxymorons. Good for a laugh, but not providing much guidance to writers. If there’s a truly helpful oxymoron site you know of, I’d like to hear about it.

REMUNERATION/RENUMERATION

Although “remuneration” looks as if it might mean “repayment” it usually means simply “payment.” In speech it is often confused with “renumeration,” re-counting (counting again).

REOCCURRING/RECURRING

It might seem logical to form this word from “occurring” by simply adding a RE- prefix—logical, but wrong. The word is “recurring.” The root form is “recur,” not “reoccur.” For some reason “recurrent” is seldom transformed into “reoccurrent.”

REPEL/REPULSE

In most of their meanings these are synonyms, but if you are disgusted by someone, you are repelled, not repulsed. The confusion is compounded by the fact that “repellent” and “repulsive” mean the same thing. Go figure.

RESISTER/RESISTOR

A resistor is part of an electrical circuit; a person who resists something is a “resister.”

RETCH/WRETCH

If you vomit, you retch; if you behave in a wretched manner or fall into wretched circumstances, you are a wretch.

RETICENT/HESITANT

“Reticent” most often means “reluctant to speak,” but it can also mean “reserved,” “restrained.” But if you’re feeling nervous about doing something, you’re hesitant: “I’m hesitant about trying the ride a unicycle in public.” Another tip: you feel reticent but you are hesitant. “Hesitant” is by far the more common word; so if you hesitate to choose between the two, go with “hesitant.”

RETURN BACK/RETURN

A redundancy. Use just “return,” unless you mean to say instead “turn back.”

REVELANT/RELEVANT

“Revelant” is both spoken and written frequently when “relevant” is intended.

REVUE/REVIEW

You can attend a musical revue in a theatre, but when you write up your reactions for a newspaper, you’re writing a review.

RIGHT OF PASSAGE/RITE OF PASSAGE

The more common phrase is “rite of passage”—a ritual one goes through to move on to the next stage of life. Learning how to work the combination on a locker is a rite of passage for many entering middle school students. A “right of passage” would be the right to travel through a certain territory, but you are unlikely to have any use for the phrase.

RIO GRANDE RIVER/RIO GRANDE

Rio is Spanish for “river,” so “Rio Grande River” is a redundancy. Just write “Rio Grande.” Non-Hispanic Americans have traditionally failed to pronounce the final “E” in “Grande”, but they’ve learned to do it to designate the large size of latte, so perhaps it’s time to start saying it the

proper Spanish way: “REE-oh GRAHN-day.” Or to be really international we could switch to the Mexican name: “Rio Bravo.”

RISKY/RISQUE

People unfamiliar with the French-derived word “risque” (“slightly indecent”) often write “risky” by mistake. Bungee-jumping is risky, but nude bungee-jumping is risqué.

ROAD TO HOE/ROW TO HOE

Out in the cotton patch you have a tough row to hoe. This saying has nothing to do with road construction.

ROB/STEAL

When you rob a bank, you steal its money. You can’t rob the money itself. The stuff taken in a robbery is always stolen, not “robbed.”

ROLE/ROLL

An actor plays a role. Bill Gates is the entrepreneur’s role model. But you eat a sausage on a roll and roll out the barrel.

ROOT/ROUT/ROUTE

You can root for your team (cheer them on) and hope that they utterly smash their opponents (create a rout), then come back in triumph on Route 27 (a road).

SACRED/SCARED

This is one of those silly typos which your spelling-checker won’t catch: gods are sacred, the damned in Hell are scared.

SACRILEGIOUS/SACRELIGIOUS

Doing something sacrilegious involves committing sacrilege. Don’t let the related word “religious” trick you into misspelling the word as “sacreligious.”

SAFETY DEPOSIT BOX/SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX

“Safety” is rarely pronounced very differently from “safe-D” so it is natural that many people suppose they are hearing the word at the beginning of this phrase, but the correct expression is in fact “safe-deposit box.”

SAIL/SALE/SELL

These simple and familiar words are surprisingly often confused in writing. You sail a boat which has a sail of canvas. You sell your old fondue pot at a yard sale.

SALSA SAUCE/SALSA

“Salsa” is Spanish for “sauce,” so “salsa sauce” is redundant. Here in the U.S., where people now spend more on salsa than on ketchup (or catsup, if you prefer), few people are unaware that it’s a sauce. Anyone so sheltered as not to be aware of that fact will need a fuller explanation: “chopped tomatoes, onions, chilies and cilantro.”

SAME DIFFERENCE

This is a jokey, deliberately illogical slang expression that doesn’t belong in formal writing.

SARCASTIC/IRONIC

Not all ironic comments are sarcastic. Sarcasm is meant to mock or wound. Irony can be amusing without being maliciously aimed at hurting anyone.

SATELLITE

Originally a satellite was a follower. Astronomers applied the term to smaller bodies orbiting about planets, like our moon. Then we began launching artificial satellites but since few people were familiar with the term in its technical meaning, the adjective “artificial” was quickly dropped in popular usage. So far so bad. Then television began to be broadcast via satellite. Much if not all television now wends its way through a satellite at some point, but in the popular imagination only broadcasts received at the viewing site via a dish antenna aimed at a satellite qualify to be called “satellite television.” Thus we see motel signs boasting:

AIR CONDITIONING * SATELLITE

People say things like “the fight’s going to be shown on satellite.” The word has become a pathetic fragment of its former self. The technologically literate speaker will avoid these slovenly abbreviations.

*At least motels have not yet adopted the automobile industry’s truncation of “air conditioning” to “air.”

SAW/SEEN

In standard English, it’s “I’ve seen” not “I’ve saw.” The helping verb “have” (abbreviated here to “‘ve”) requires “seen.” In the simple past (no helping verb), the expression is “I saw,” not “I seen.” “I’ve seen a lot of ugly cars, but when I saw that old beat-up Rambler I couldn’t

believe my eyes.”

SAY/TELL

You say “Hello, Mr. Chips” to the teacher, and then tell him about what you did last summer. You can’t “tell that” except in expressions like “go tell that to your old girlfriend.”

SCHIZOPHRENIC

In popular usage, “schizophrenic” (and the more slangy and now dated “schizoid”) indicates “split between two attitudes.” This drives people with training in psychiatry crazy. “Schizo-” does indeed mean “split,” but is used here to mean “split off from reality.” Someone with a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality is suffering from “multiple personality disorder” (or, more recently, “dissociative identity disorder”), not “schizophrenia.”

SCI-FI

“Sci-fi,” the widely used abbreviation for “science fiction,” is objectionable to most professional science fiction writers, scholars, and many fans. Some of them scornfully designate alien monster movies and other trivial entertainments “sci-fi” (which they pronounce “skiffy”) to distinguish them from true science fiction. The preferred abbreviation in these circles is “SF.” The problem with this abbreviation is that to the general public “SF” means “San Francisco.” “The Sci-Fi Channel” has exacerbated the conflict over this term. If you are a reporter approaching a science fiction writer or expert you immediately mark yourself as an outsider by using the term “sci-fi.”

SEA CHANGE

In Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, Ariel deceitfully sings to Ferdinand:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

This rich language has so captivated the ears of generations of writers that they feel compelled to describe as “sea changes” not only alterations that are “rich and strange,” but, less appropriately, those that are simply large or sudden. Always popular, this cliché has recently become so pervasive as to make “sea” an almost inextricable companion to “change” whatever its meaning. In its original context, it meant nothing more complex than “a change caused by the sea.” Since the phrase is almost always improperly used and is greatly over-used, it has suffered a swamp change into something dull and tiresome. Avoid the phrase; otherwise you will irritate those who know it and puzzle those who do not.

SEAM/SEEM

“Seem” is the verb, “seam” the noun. Use “seam” only of things like the line produced when two pieces of cloth are sewn together or a thread of coal in a geological formation.

SHRIMP SCAMPI

Almost every pretentious restaurant’s menu these days features a dish called “shrimp scampi,” which is meant to imply some vaguely Italian recipe for shrimp. “Scampi” are a sort of “shrimp” in Italian,* so “shrimp scampi” is a redundancy. What’s next—“veal vitello” and “cheese formaggio?”

*Specifically prawns, which are only a largish variety of shrimp. You wouldn’t call a dish “shrimp prawns” now, would you?

SECOND OF ALL/SECOND

“First of all” makes sense when you want to emphasize the primacy of the first item in a series, but it should not be followed by “second of all,” where the expression serves no such function. And “secondly” is an adverbial form which makes no sense at all in enumeration (neither does “firstly”). As you go through your list, say simply “second,” “third,” “fourth,” etc.

SELF-WORTH/SELF-ESTEEM

To say that a person has a low sense of self-worth makes sense, though it’s inelegant; but people commonly truncate the phrase, saying instead, “He has low self-worth.” This would literally mean that he isn’t worth much rather than that he has a low opinion of himself. “Self-esteem” sounds much more literate.

SENSUAL/SENSUOUS

“Sensual” usually relates to physical desires and experiences, and often means “sexy.” But “sensuous” is more often used of esthetic pleasures, like “sensuous music.” The two words do overlap a good deal. The leather seats in your new car may be sensuous; but if they turn you on, they might be sensual. “Sensual” often has a slightly racy or even judgmental tone lacking in “sensuous.”

SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

There are actually many fine uses for sentence fragments. Here’s a brief scene from an imaginary Greek tragedy composed entirely of fragments:

Menelaus: Aha! Helen! Helen (startled): Beloved husband! Menelaus: Slut! Paris (entering, seeing Menelaus): Oops. ‘Bye. Menelaus: Not so fast! (stabs Paris). Paris: Arrggh!

Some people get into trouble by breaking a perfectly good sentence in two: “We did some research in newspapers. Like the National

Inquirer.” The second phrase belongs in the same sentence with the first, not dangling off on its own.

A more common kind of troublesome fragment is a would-be sentence introduced by a word or phrase that suggests it’s part of some other sentence: “By picking up the garbage the fraternity had strewn around the street the weekend before got the group a favorable story in the paper.” Just lop off “by” to convert this into a proper complete sentence.

SERVICE/SERVE

A mechanic services your car and a stallion services a mare; but most of the time when you want to talk about the goods or services you supply, the word you want is “serve”: “Our firm serves the hotel industry.”

SET/SIT

In some dialects people say “come on in and set a spell,” but in standard English the word is “sit.” You set down an object or a child you happen to be carrying; but those seating themselves sit.

SETUP/SET UP

Technical writers sometimes confuse “setup” as a noun (“check the setup”) with the phrase “set up” (“set up the experiment”).

SHALL/WILL

“Will” has almost entirely replaced “shall” in American English except in legal documents and in questions like “Shall we have red wine with the duck?”

SHERBERT/SHERBET

The name for these icy desserts is derived from Turkish/Persian “sorbet,” but the “R” in the first syllable seems to seduce many speakers into adding one in the second, where it doesn’t belong. A California chain called “Herbert’s Sherbets” had me confused on this point for years when I was growing up.

SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS/SIERRA NEVADAS

Sierra is Spanish for “mountain range,” so knowledgeable Westerners usually avoid a redundancy by simply referring to “the Sierra Nevadas” or simply “the Sierras.” Transplanted weather forecasters often get this wrong.

SILICON/SILICONE

Silicon is a chemical element, the basic stuff of which microchips are made. Sand is largely silicon. Silicones are plastics and other materials containing silicon, the most commonly discussed example being silicone breast implants. Less used by the general public is “silica”: the oxide of silicon.

SIMPLISTIC

“Simplistic” means “overly simple,” and is always used negatively. Don’t substitute it when you just mean to say “simple” or even “very simple.”

SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS

In standard American writing, the only use for single quotation marks is to designate a quotation within a quotation. Students are exposed by Penguin Books and other publishers to the British practice of using single quotes for normal quotations and become confused. Some strange folkloric process has convinced many people that while entire sentences and long phrases are surrounded by conventional double quotation marks, single words and short phrases take single quotation marks. “Wrong,” I insist.

SLIGHT OF HAND/SLEIGHT OF HAND

“Sleight” is an old word meaning “cleverness, skill,” and the proper expression is “sleight of hand.” It’s easy to understand why it’s confused with “slight” since the two words are pronounced in exactly the same way.

SLUFF OFF/SLOUGH OFF

You use a loofah to slough off dead skin.

SNUCK/SNEAKED

When Huckleberry Finn “snuck” out of a house he was acting according to his character—and dialect. This is one of many cases in which people’s humorously self-conscious use of dialect has influenced others to adopt it as standard and it is now often seen even in sophisticated writing in the U.S. But it is safer to use the traditional form: “sneaked.”

SOMETIME/SOME TIME

“Let’s get together sometime.” When you use the one-word form, it suggests some indefinite time in the future. “Some time” is not wrong in this sort of context, but it is required when being more specific: “Choose some time that fits in your schedule.” “Some” is an adjective here modifying “time.” The same pattern applies to “someday” (vague) and “some day” (specific).

SO/VERY

Originally people said things like “I was so delighted with the wrapping that I couldn’t bring myself to open the package.” But then they began to lazily say “You made me so happy,” no longer explaining just how happy that was. This pattern of using “so” as a simple intensifier meaning “very” is now standard in casual speech, but is out of place in formal writing, where “very” or another intensifier works better. Without vocal emphasis, the “so” conveys little in print.

SO FUN/SO MUCH FUN

Strictly a young person’s usage: “That party was so fun!” If you don’t want to be perceived as a gum-chewing airhead, say “so much fun.”

SOCIAL/SOCIETAL

“Societal” as an adjective has been in existence for a couple of centuries, but has become widely used only in the recent past. People who imagine that “social” has too many frivolous connotations of mere partying often resort to it to make their language more serious and impressive. It is best used by social scientists and others in referring to the influence of societies: “societal patterns among the Ibo of western Nigeria.” Used in place of “social” in ordinary speech and writing it sounds pretentious.

SOJOURN/JOURNEY

Although the spelling of this word confuses many people into thinking it means “journey,” a sojourn is actually a temporary stay in one place. If you’re constantly on the move, you’re not engaged in a sojourn.

SOMEWHAT OF A/SOMEWHAT, SOMETHING OF A

This error is the result of confusing two perfectly good usages: “She is somewhat awkward,” and “He is something of a klutz.” Use one or the other instead.

SOONER/RATHER

“I’d sooner starve than eat what they serve in the cafeteria” is less formal than “I’d rather starve.”

SOUP DU JOUR OF THE DAY/SOUP OF THE DAY

“Soupe du jour” (note the “E” on the end of “soupe”) means “soup of the day.” If you’re going to use French to be pretentious on a menu, it’s important to learn the meaning of the words you’re using. Often what is offered is potage, anyway. Keep it simple, keep it in English, and you can’t go wrong.

SOUR GRAPES

In a famous fable by Aesop, a fox declared that he didn’t care that he could not reach an attractive bunch of grapes because he imagined they were probably sour anyway. You express sour grapes when you put down something you can’t get: “winning the lottery is just a big headache anyway.” The phrase is misused in all sorts of ways by people who don’t know the original story and imagine it means something more general like “bitterness” or “resentment.”

SPADED/SPAYED

If you have neutered your dog, you’ve spayed it; save the spading until it dies.

STATES/COUNTRIES

Citizens of the United States, where states are smaller subdivisions of the country, are sometimes surprised to see “states” referring instead to foreign countries. Note that the U.S. Department of State deals with foreign affairs, not those of U.S. states. Clearly distinguish these two uses of “state” in your writing.

STATIONARY/STATIONERY

When something is standing still, it’s stationary. That piece of paper you write a letter on is stationery.

STEREO

“Stereo” refers properly to a means of reproducing sound in two or more discrete channels to create a solid, apparently three-dimensional sound. Because in the early days only fanciers of high fidelity (or hi-fi) equipment could afford stereophonic sound, “stereo” came to be used as a substitute for “high fidelity,” and even “record player.” Stereo equipment (for instance a cheap portable cassette player) is not necessarily high fidelity equipment. Visual technology creating a sense of depth by using two different lenses can also use the root “stereo” as in “stereoscope.”

STOMP/STAMP

“Stomp” is colloquial, casual. A pro wrestler stomps his opponent. But in more formal contexts “stamp” is preferred. But you will probably not be able to stamp out the spread of “stomp.”

STRAIGHTJACKET/STRAITJACKET

The old word “strait” (“narrow, tight”) has survived only as a noun in geography referring to a narrow body of water (“the Bering Strait”) and in a few adjectival uses such as “straitjacket” (a narrowly confining garment) and “strait-laced” (literally laced up tightly, but usually meaning

narrow-minded). Its unfamiliarity causes many people to mistakenly substitute the more common “straight.” Incidentally, the “street called Straight” in the King James Version of the Bible (Acts 9:11) was narrow rather than free of bends.

SUBSTANCE-FREE

An administrator at our university announced recently that his goal was a “substance-free” campus, which I suppose fits in with the growing fad of “virtual education.” What he really meant was, of course, a campus free of illegal drugs and alcohol, designated “controlled substances” in the law. This is a very silly expression, but if he’d just said “sober and straight” he would have sounded too censorious. How about “drug- and alcohol-free”?

SUBSTITUTE WITH/SUBSTITUTE FOR

You can substitute pecans for the walnuts in a brownie recipe, but many people mistakenly say “substitute with” instead, perhaps influenced by the related expression “replace with.” It’s always “substitute for.”

SUFFER WITH/SUFFER FROM

Although technical medical usage sometimes differs, in normal speech we say that a person suffers from a disease rather than suffering with it.

SUIT/SUITE

Your bedroom suite consists of the bed, the nightstand, and whatever other furniture goes with it. Your pajamas would be your bedroom suit.

SUMMARY/SUMMERY

When the weather is warm and summery and you don’t feel like spending a lot of time reading that long report from the restructuring committee, just read the summary.

SUPERCEDE/SUPERSEDE

“Supersede,” meaning to replace, originally meant “to sit higher” than, from Latin sedere, “to sit.” In the Eighteenth Century, rich people were often carried about as they sat in sedan chairs. Don’t be misled by the fact that this word rhymes with words having quite different roots, such as “intercede.”

SUPPOSABLY or SUPPOSINGLY/SUPPOSEDLY

“Supposedly” is the standard form. “Supposably” can be used only when the meaning is “capable of being supposed,” and then only in the U.S. You won’t get into trouble if you stick with “supposedly.”

SUPPOSE TO/SUPPOSED TO

Because the D and the T are blended into a single consonant when this phrase is pronounced, many writers are unaware that the D is even present and omit it in writing. You’re supposed to get this one right if you want to earn the respect of your readers. See also “use to.”

SURFING THE INTERNET

“Channel-surfing” developed as an ironic term to denote the very unathletic activity of randomly changing channels on a television set with a remote control. Its only similarity to surfboarding on real surf has to do with the esthetic of “going with the flow.” The Internet could be a fearsomely difficult place to navigate until the World Wide Web was invented; casual clicking on Web links was naturally quickly compared to channel-surfing, so the expression “surfing the Web” was a natural extension of the earlier expression. But the Web is only one aspect of the Internet, and you label yourself as terminally uncool if you say “surfing the Internet.” (Cool people say “Net” anyway.) It makes no sense to refer to targeted, purposeful searches for information as “surfing”; for that reason I call my classes on Internet research techniques “scuba-diving the Internet.”

However, Jean Armour Polly, who claims to have originated the phrase “surfing the Internet” in 1992, maintains that she intended it to have exactly the connotations it now has. See her page on the history of the term: (http://www.netmom.com/about/surfing_main.htm).

TAKE A DIFFERENT TACT/TAKE A DIFFERENT TACK

This expression has nothing to do with tactfulness and everything to do with sailing, in which it is a direction taken as one tacks—abruptly turns—a boat. To “take a different tack” is to try another approach.

TAKEN BACK/TAKEN ABACK

When you’re startled by something, you’re taken aback by it. When you’re reminded of something from your past, you’re taken back to that time.

TAUGHT/TAUT

Students are taught, ropes are pulled taut.

TAUNT/TAUT

I am told that medical personnel often mistakenly refer to a patient’s abdomen as “taunt” rather than the correct “taut.” “Taunt” (“tease”) can be a verb or noun, but never an adjective. “Taut” means “tight, distended,” and is always an adjective.

TENANT/TENET

These two words come from the same Latin root, *tenere*, meaning “to hold”; but they have very different meanings. “Tenet” is the rarer of the two, meaning a belief that a person holds: “Avoiding pork is a tenet of the Muslim faith.” In contrast, the person leasing an apartment from you is your tenant. (She holds the lease.)

TENDER HOOKS/TENTERHOOKS

A “tenter” is a canvas-stretcher, and to be “on tenterhooks” means to be as tense with anticipation as a canvas stretched on one.

TENTATIVE

Often all-too-tentatively pronounced “tennative.” Sound all three “T’s.”

THAN/THEN

When comparing one thing with another you may find that one is more appealing “than” another. “Than” is the word you want when doing comparisons. But if you are talking about time, choose “then”: “First you separate the eggs; then you beat the whites.” Alexis is smarter than I, not “then I.”

THAT/WHICH

I must confess that I do not myself observe the distinction between “that” and “which.” Furthermore, there is little evidence that this distinction is or has ever been regularly made in past centuries by careful writers of English. However, a small but impassioned group of authorities has urged the distinction; so here is the information you will need to pacify them.

If you are defining something by distinguishing it from a larger class of which it is a member, use “that”: “I chose the lettuce that had the fewest wilted leaves.” When the general class is not being limited or defined in some way, then “which” is appropriate: “He made an iceberg lettuce Caesar salad, which didn’t taste right.”

THAT KIND/THAT KIND OF

Although expressions like “that kind thing” are common in some dialects, standard English requires “of” to follow this kind of phrase.

THEM/THOSE

One use of “them” for “those” has become a standard catch phrase: “how do you like them apples?” This is deliberate dialectical humor. But “I like them little canapes with the shrimp on top” is gauche; say instead “I like those little canapes.”

THEREFOR/THEREFORE

The form without a final “E” is an archaic bit of legal terminology meaning “for.” The word most people want is “therefore.”

THESE ARE THEM/THESE ARE THEY

Although only the pickiest listeners will cringe when you say “these are them,” the traditionally correct phrase is “these are they,” because “they” is the predicate nominative of “these.” However, if people around you seem more comfortable with “it’s me” than “it’s I,” you might as well stick with “these are them.”

THESE ONES/THESE

By itself, there’s nothing wrong with the word “ones” as a plural: “surrounded by her loved ones.” However, “this one” should not be pluralized to “these ones.” Just say “these.” The same pattern applies to “those.”

THEY’RE/THEIR/THERE

Many people are so spooked by apostrophes that a word like “they’re” seems to them as if it might mean almost anything. In fact, it’s always a contraction of “they are.” If you’ve written “they’re,” ask yourself whether you can substitute “they are.” If not, you’ve made a mistake. “Their” is a possessive pronoun like “her” or “our”: “They eat their hotdogs with sauerkraut.” Everything else is “there.” “There goes the ball, out of the park! See it? Right there! There aren’t very many home runs like that.” “Thier” is a common misspelling, but you can avoid it by remembering that “they” and “their” begin with the same three letters. Another hint: “there” has “here” buried inside it to remind you it refers to place, while “their” has “heir” buried in it to remind you that it has to do with possession.

THEIRSELVES/THEMSELVES

There is no such word as “theirselves” (and you certainly can’t spell it “theirself” or “thierselves”); it’s “themselves.” And there is no correct singular form of this non-word; instead of “theirself” use “himself” or “herself.”

THEREFOR/THEREFORE

The form without a final “E” is an archaic bit of legal terminology meaning “for.” The word most people want is “therefore.”

THERE’S

People often forget that “there’s” is a contraction of “there is” and mistakenly say “there’s three burrs caught in your hair” when they mean “there’re” (“there are”). Use “there’s” only when referring to one item.

THESE KIND/THIS KIND

In a sentence like “I love this kind of chocolates,” “this” modifies “kind” (singular) and not “chocolates” (plural), so it would be incorrect to change it to “I love these kind of chocolates.” Only if “kind” itself is pluralized into “kinds” should “this” shift to “these”: “You keep making these kinds of mistakes!”

THESE ONES/THESE

By itself, there’s nothing wrong with the word “ones” as a plural: “surrounded by her loved ones.” However, “this one” should not be pluralized to “these ones.” Just say “these.”

THEY/THEIR (SINGULAR)

Using the plural pronoun to refer to a single person of unspecified gender is an old and honorable pattern in English, not a newfangled bit of degeneracy or a PC-plot to avoid sexism (though it often serves the latter purpose). People who insist that “Everyone has brought his own lunch” is the only correct form do not reflect the usage of centuries of fine writers. A good general rule is that only when the singular noun does not specify an individual can it be replaced plausibly with a plural pronoun: “Everybody” is a good example. We know that “everybody” is singular because we say “everybody is here,” not “everybody are here” yet we tend to think of “everybody” as a group of individuals, so we usually say “everybody brought their own grievances to the bargaining table.” “Anybody” is treated similarly. See an exhaustive essay on the subject by Henry Churchyard: <http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~churchh/austtheir.html>.

However, in many written sentences the use of singular “their” and “they” creates an irritating clash even when it passes unnoticed in speech. It is wise to shun this popular pattern in formal writing. Often expressions can be pluralized to make the “they” or “their” indisputably proper: “All of them have brought their own lunches.” “People” can often be substituted for “each.” Americans seldom avail themselves of the otherwise very handy British “one” to avoid specifying gender because it sounds to our ears rather pretentious: “One’s hound should retrieve only one’s own grouse.” If you decide to try “one,” don’t switch to “they” in mid-sentence: “One has to be careful about how they speak” sounds absurd because the word “one” so emphatically calls attention to its singleness. The British also quite sensibly treat collective bodies like governmental units and corporations as plural (“Parliament have approved their agenda”) whereas Americans insist on treating them as singular.

THINK ON/THINK ABOUT

An archaic form which persists in some dialects is seen in statements like “I’ll think on it” when most people would say “I’ll think about it.”

THOUGH/THOUGHT/THROUGH

Although most of us know the differences between these words people often type one of them when they mean another. Spelling checkers won’t catch this sort of slip, so look out for it.

THRONE/TROWN

A throne is that chair a king sits on, at least until he gets thrown out of office.

THUSLY/TUS

“Thusly” has been around for a long time, but it is widely viewed as nonstandard. It’s safer to go with plain old “thus.”

TIME PERIOD

The only kinds of periods meant by people who use this phrase are periods of time, so it’s a redundancy. Simply say “time” or “period.”

TIMES SMALLER

Mathematically literate folks object to expressions like “my paycheck is three times smaller than it used to be” because “times” indicates multiplication and should logically apply only to increases in size. Say “one third as large” instead.

TO/TOO/TWO

People seldom mix “two” up with the other two; it obviously belongs with words that also begin with a TW, like “twice” and “twenty” that involve the number 2. But the other two are confused all the time. Just remember that the only meanings of “too” are “also” (“I want some ice cream too”) and “in excess” (“Your walkman is playing too loudly.”) Note that extra O. It should remind you that this word has to do with adding more on to something. “To” is the proper spelling for all the other uses.

TO HOME/AT HOME

In some dialects people say “I stayed to home to wait for the mail,” but in standard English the expression is “stayed at home.”

TODAY’S MODERN SOCIETY/TODAY

People seeking to be up-to-the-minute often indulge in such redundancies as “in today’s modern society” or “in the modern society of today.” This is empty arm-waving which says nothing more than “now” or “today.” A reasonable substitute is “contemporary society.” Such phrases are usually indulged in by people with a weak grasp of history to substitute for such more precise expressions as “for the past five years” or “this month.” See “since the beginning of time.”

TOLLED/TOLD

Some people imagine that the expression should be “all tolled” as if items were being ticked off to the tolling of a bell, or involved the paying of a toll; but in fact this goes back to an old meaning of “tell”: “to count.” You could “tell over” your beads if you were counting them in a rosary. “All told” means “all counted.”

TONGUE AND CHEEK/TONGUE IN CHEEK

When people want to show they are kidding or have just knowingly uttered a falsehood, they stick their tongues in their cheeks, so it’s “tongue in cheek,” not “tongue and cheek.”

TOWARD/TOWARDS

These two words are interchangeable, but “toward” is more common in the U.S. and “towards” in the U.K.

TRADEGY/TRAGEDY

Not only do people often misspell “tragedy” as “tradezy,” they mispronounce it that way too. Just remember that the adjective is “tragic” to recall that it’s the G that comes after the A.

TROOP/TROUPE

A group of performers is a troupe. Any other group of people, military or otherwise, is a troop.

TRACK HOME/TRACT HOME

Commuters from a tract home may well feel that they are engaged in a rat race, but that does not justify them in describing their housing development as a “track.” “Tract” here means an area of land on which cheap and uniform houses have been built.

TRY AND/TRY TO

Although it is common in colloquial speech and will usually pass unremarked there, in writing try to remember to use “try to” instead of “try and.”

UFO

“UFO” stands for “Unidentified Flying Object,” so if you’re sure that silvery disk is an alien spacecraft, there’s no point in calling it a “UFO.” I love the sign in a Seattle bookstore labeling the alien-invasion section: “Incorrectly Identified Flying Objects.”

UNCONSCIENCE/UNCONSCIOUS

Do people confuse the unconscious with conscience because the stuff fermenting in one’s unconscious is often stuff that bothers one’s conscience? Whatever the cause, there is no such word as “unconscience.” And while we’re on the subject, Freudian psychology does not use “subconscious” which implies something that is merely not consciously thought of, rather than something that is suppressed, though it is used by Jungians.

UNREST

Journalists often use this mild term to describe all manner of civil disorders, but it’s silly to call mayhem or chaos merely “unrest” when there are bullets flying about and bodies lying in the streets.

VAGUE REFERENCE

Vague reference is a common problem in sentences where “this,” “it,” “which” or other such words don’t refer back to any one specific word or phrase, but a whole situation. “I hitchhiked back to town, got picked up by an alien spacecraft and was subjected to humiliating medical experiments, which is why I didn’t get my paper done on time.” In conversation this sort of thing goes unnoticed, but more care needs to be taken in writing. There are lots of ways to reorganize this sentence to avoid the vague reference. You could begin the sentence with “because” and replace “which is why” with “so,” for instance.

Sometimes the referent is only understood and not directly expressed at all: “Changing your oil regularly is important, which is one reason your engine burned up.” The “which” refers to an implied failure to change oil regularly, but doesn’t actually refer back to any of the specific words used earlier in the sentence.

Sometimes there is no logical referent: “In the book it says that Shakespeare was in love with some ‘dark lady’.” This is a casual way of using “it” which is not acceptable in formal written English. Write instead “Arthur O. Williams says in The Sonnets that Shakespeare. . . .”

The reference may be ambiguous because it’s not clear which of two referents is meant: “Most women are attracted to guys with a good sense of humor unless they are into practical jokes.” Does “they” refer to “women” or “guys”? It would be clearer if the sentence said “Most women are attracted to guys with a good sense of humor, though not usually to practical jokers.”

VARIOUS/SEVERAL

Many people say “she heard from various of the committee members that they wanted to cancel the next meeting.” “Several of the committee members” would be better.

VARY/VERY

“Vary” means “to change.” Don’t substitute it for “very” in phrases like “very nice” or “very happy.”

VEIL OF TEARS/VALE OF TEARS

The expression “vale of tears” goes back to pious sentiments that consider life on earth to be a series of sorrows to be left behind when we go on to a better world in Heaven. It conjures up an image of a suffering traveler laboring through a valley (“vale”) of troubles and sorrow. “Veil of tears” is poetic-sounding, but it’s a mistake.

VERB TENSE

If the situation being described is an ongoing or current one, the present tense is needed, even in a past-tense context: “Last week she admitted that she is really a brunette” (not “was”).

Pairs of verbs that go together logically have to be kept in the same tense. “Patricia described her trip to China and writes that the Great Wall really impressed her.” Since “described” is in the past tense, and the writing contains his descriptions, “writes” should be “wrote.”

Here’s a typical clumsy sentence describing a hypothetical situation in the past of a sort that gets lots of people into trouble: “If he would have packed his own suitcase, he would have noticed that the cat was in it.” That first “would have” should be a simple “had”: “If he had packed his own suitcase he would have noticed that the cat was in it.” Also “The game would have been more fun if we had [not “would have”] won.” This sort of construction consists of two parts: a hypothetical cause in the past and its logical effect. The hypothetical cause needs to be put into the past tense: “had.” Only the effect is made conditional “would have.” Note that in the second example above the effect is referred to before the cause.

Students summarizing the plot of a play, movie, or novel are often unfamiliar with the tradition of doing so in the present tense: “Hester embroiders an ‘A’ on her dress.” Think of the events in a piece of fiction as happening whenever you read them—they exist in an eternal present even if they are narrated in the past tense. Even those who are familiar with this pattern get tripped up when they begin to discuss the historical or biographical context of a work, properly using this past tense, and forget to shift back to the present when they return to plot summary. Here’s how it’s done correctly: “Mark Twain’s days on the Mississippi were long past when he wrote Huckleberry Finn; but Huck’s love for life on the river clearly reflects his youthful experience as a steamboat pilot.” The verb “reflects” is in the present tense. Often the author’s activity in writing is also rendered in the present tense as well: “Twain depicts Pap as a disgusting drunk.” What about when you are comparing events that occur at two different times in the same narrative? You still have to stick to the present: “Tom puts Jim through a lot of unnecessary misery before telling him that he is free.” Just remember when you go from English to your history class that you have to shift back to the past tense for narrating historical events: “Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo.”

VERBAGE/VERBIAGE

“Verbiage” is an insulting term usually meant to disparage needlessly wordy prose. Don’t use it to mean simply “wording.” There is no such word as “verbage.”

VERSES/VERSUS

The “vs.” in a law case like “Brown vs. The Board of Education” stands for Latin versus (meaning “against”). Don’t confuse it with the word for lines of poetry—“verses”—when describing other conflicts, like the upcoming football game featuring Oakesdale versus Pinewood.

VERY UNIQUE/UNIQUE

“Unique” singles out one of a kind. That “un” at the beginning is a form of “one.” A thing is unique (the only one of its kind) or it is not. Something may be almost unique (there are very few like it), but nothing is “very unique.”

UPMOST/UTMOST

The word is “utmost,” and is related to words like “utter,” as in “The birthday party was utter chaos.” “Upmost” may seem logical, but it’s a sure sign of a person who knows spoken English better than written English.

USE TO/USED TO

Because the D and the T are blended into a single consonant when this phrase is pronounced, many writers are unaware that the D is even present and omit it in writing. See also “suppose to.”

VICIOUS/VISCOUS CIRCLE/CYCLE

The term “vicious circle” was invented by logicians to describe a form of fallacious circular argument in which each term of the argument draws on the other: “Democracy is the best form of government because democratic elections produce the best governments.” The phrase has been extended in popular usage to all kinds of self-exacerbating processes such as this: poor people often find themselves borrowing money to pay off their debts, but in the process create even more onerous debts which in their turn will need to be financed by further borrowing. Sensing vaguely that such destructive spirals are not closed loops, the folk process transmuted “vicious circle” into “vicious cycle.” The problem with this perfectly logical change is that a lot of people know what the original “correct” phrase was and are likely to scorn users of the new one. They go beyond scorn to contempt however toward those poor souls who render the phrase as “viscous cycle.” Don’t use this expression unless you are discussing a Harley-Davidson in dire need of an oil change.

VIDEO/FILM

Many of us can remember when portable transistorized radios were ignorantly called “transistors.” We have a tendency to abbreviate the names of various sorts of electronic technology (see “stereo” and “satellite”), often in the process confusing medium with content. Video is the electronic reproduction of images, and applies to broadcast and cable television, prerecorded videocassette recordings (made on a videocassette recorder, or VCR), and related technologies. MTV appropriated this broad term for a very narrow meaning: “videotaped productions of visual material meant to accompany popular music recordings.” This is now what most people mean when they speak of “a video,” unless they are “renting a video,” in which case they mean a videocassette or DVD recording of a film. One also hears people referring to theatrical films which they happened to have viewed in videotaped reproduction as “videos.” This is simply wrong. A film is a film (or movie), whether it is projected on a screen from 35 or 70 mm film or broadcast via the NTSC, SECAM or PAL standard. Orson Welles’ “Citizen Kane” is not now and never will be a “video.”

VINEGARETTE/VINAIGRETTE

Naive diners and restaurant workers alike commonly mispronounce the classic French dressing called “vinaigrette” as if it were “vinegarette.” To be more sophisticated, say “vin-uh-GRETT” (the first syllable rhymes with “seen”).

VITAE/VITA

Unless you are going to claim credit for accomplishments in previous incarnations, you should refer to your “vita,” not your “vitae.” All kidding aside, the “ae” in “vitae” supposedly indicates the genitive rather than the plural; but the derivation of “vita” from “curriculum vitae” is purely speculative (see the Oxford English Dictionary), and “vitae” on its own makes no sense grammatically.

“Resume,” by the way, is a French word with both “Es” accented, and literally means “summary.” In English one often sees it without the accents, or with only the second accent, neither of which is a serious error; but if you’re trying to show how multilingual you are, remember the first accent.

VIOLA/VOILA

A viola is a flower or a musical instrument. The expression which means “behold!” is “voila.” It comes from a French expression literally meaning “look there!” In French it is spelled with a grave accent over the A, but when it was adopted into English, it lost its accent. Such barbarous misspellings as “vwala” are even worse, caused by the reluctance of English speakers to believe that “OI” can represent the sound “wah,” as it usually does in French.

VOLUMPTUOUS/VOLUPTUOUS

Given the current mania for slim, taut bodies, it is understandable—if amusing—that some folks should confuse voluptuousness with lumpiness. In fact, “voluptuous” is derived from Latin “voluptas,” which refers to sensual pleasure and not to shape at all. A voluptuous body is a luxurious body.

WARRANTEE/WARRANTY

Confused by the spelling of “guarantee,” people often misspell the related word “warrantee” rather than the correct “warranty.” “Warrantee” is a rare legal term which means “the person to whom a warrant is made.” Although “guarantee” can be a verb (“we guarantee your satisfaction”), “warranty” is not. The rarely used verb form is “to warrant.”

WARY/WEARY/LEERY

People sometimes write “weary” (tired) when they mean “wary” (cautious) which is a close synonym with “leery” which in the psychedelic era was often misspelled “leary”; but since Timothy Leary faded from public consciousness, the correct spelling has prevailed.

WASH

In my mother’s Oklahoma dialect, “wash” was pronounced “warsh,” and I was embarrassed to discover in school that the inclusion of the superfluous “R” sound was considered ignorant. This has made me all the more sensitive now that I live in Washington to the mispronunciation “Warshington.” Some people tell you that after you “warsh” you should “wrench” (“rinse”).

WAY/FAR, MUCH MORE

Young people frequently use phrases like “way better” to mean “far better” or “very much better.” In formal writing, it would be gauche to say that Impressionism is “way more popular” than Cubism instead of “much more popular.”

WAYS/WAY

In some dialects it’s common to say “you’ve got a ways to go before you’ve saved enough to buy a Miata,” but in standard English it’s “a way to go.”

WEATHER/WETHER/WHETHER

The climate is made up of “weather”; whether it is nice out depends on whether it is raining or not. A wether is just a castrated sheep.

WENT/GONE

The past participle of “go” is “gone” so it’s not “I should have went to the party” but “I should have gone to the party.”

WERE/WHERE

Sloppy typists frequently leave the “H” out of “where.” Spelling checkers do not catch this sort of error, of course, so look for it as you proofread.

WET YOUR APPETITE/WHET YOUR APPETITE

It is natural to think that something mouth-watering “wets your appetite,” but actually the expression is “whet your appetite”—sharpen your appetite, as a whetstone sharpens a knife.

WHAT/THAT

In some dialects it is common to substitute “what” for “that,” as in “You should dance with him what brung you.” This is not standard usage.

WHEAT/WHOLE WHEAT

Waiters routinely ask “Wheat or white?” when bread is ordered, but the white bread is also made of wheat. The correct term is “whole wheat,” in which the whole grain, including the bran and germ, has been used to make the flour. “Whole wheat” does not necessarily imply that no white flour has been used in the bread; most whole wheat breads incorporate some white flour.

WHEREABOUTS ARE/WHEREABOUTS IS

Despite the deceptive “S” on the end of the word, “whereabouts” is normally singular, not plural. “The whereabouts of the stolen diamond is unknown.” Only if you were simultaneously referring to two or more persons having separate whereabouts would the word be plural, and you are quite unlikely to want to do so.

WHERE IT’S AT

This slang expression gained widespread currency in the sixties as a hip way of stating that the speaker understood the essential truth of a situation: “I know where it’s at.” Or more commonly: “You don’t know where it’s at.” It is still heard from time to time with that meaning, but the user risks being labeled as a quaint old Boomer. However, standard usage never accepted the literal sense of the phrase. Don’t say, “I put my purse down and now I don’t know where it’s at” unless you want to be regarded as uneducated. “Where it is” will do fine; the “at” is redundant.

WHETHER/WHETHER OR NOT

“Whether” works fine on its own in most contexts: “I wonder whether I forgot to turn off the stove?” But when you mean “regardless of whether” it has to be followed by “or not” somewhere in the sentence: “We need to leave for the airport in five minutes whether you’ve found your teddy bear or not.”

See also “if/whether.”

WHILST/WHILE

Although “whilst” is a perfectly good traditional synonym of “while,” in American usage it is considered pretentious and old-fashioned.

WHIMP/WIMP

The original and still by far the most common spelling of this common bit of slang meaning “weakling, coward,” is “wimp.” If you use the much less common “whimp” instead people may regard you as a little wimpy.

WHISKY/WHISKEY

Scots prefer the spelling “whisky”; Americans follow instead the Irish spelling, so Kentucky bourbon is “whiskey.”

WHO’S/WHOSE

This is one of those cases where it is important to remember that possessive pronouns never take apostrophes, even though possessive nouns do (see it’s/its). “Who’s” always and forever means only “who is,” as in “Who’s that guy with the droopy mustache?” or “who has,” as in “Who’s been eating my porridge?” “Whose” is the possessive form of “who” and is used as follows: “Whose dirty socks are these on the breakfast table?”

WHO/WHOM

“Whom” has been dying an agonizing death for decades—you’ll notice there are no Whoms in Dr. Seuss’s Whoville. Many people never use the word in speech at all. However, in formal writing, critical readers still expect it to be used when appropriate. The distinction between “who” and “whom” is basically simple: “who” is the subject form of this pronoun and “whom” is the object form. “Who was wearing that awful dress at the Academy Awards banquet?” is correct because “who” is the subject of the sentence. “The MC was so startled by the neckline that he forgot to whom he was supposed to give the Oscar” is correct because “whom” is the object of the preposition “to.” So far so good.

Now consider this sort of question: “Who are you staring at?” Although strictly speaking the pronoun should be “whom,” nobody who wants to be taken seriously would use it in this case, though it is the object of the preposition “at”. (Bothered by ending the sentence with a preposition? See my “Non-Errors” section.) “Whom” is very rarely used even by careful speakers as the first word in a question; and many authorities have now conceded the point.

Another sort of question in which “whom” appears later in the sentence: “I wonder whom he bribed to get the contract?” This may seem at first similar to the previous example, but here “whom” is not the subject of any verb in the sentence; rather it is part of the noun clause which itself is the object of the verb “wonder.” Here an old gender-biased but effective test for “whom” can be used. Try rewriting the sentence using “he” or “him.” Clearly “He bribed he” is incorrect; you would say “he bribed him.” Where “him” is the proper word in the paraphrased sentence, use “whom.”

Instances in which the direct object appears at the beginning of a sentence are tricky because we are used to having subjects in that position and are strongly tempted to use “who”: “Whomever Susan admired most was likely to get the job.” (Test: “She admired him.” Right?)

Where things get really messy is in statements in which the object or subject status of the pronoun is not immediately obvious. Example: “The police gave tickets to whoever had parked in front of the fire hydrant.” The object of the preposition “to” is the entire noun clause, “whoever had parked in front of the fire hydrant,” but “whoever” is the subject of that clause, the subject of the verb “had parked.” Here’s a case where the temptation to use “whomever” should be resisted.

Confused? Just try the “he or him” test, and if it’s still not clear, go with “who.” You’ll bother fewer people and have a fair chance of being right.

A WHOLE ‘NOTHER/A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

It is one thing to use the expression “a whole ‘nother” as a consciously slangy phrase suggesting rustic charm and a completely different matter to use it mistakenly. The “A” at the beginning of the phrase is the common article “a” but is here treated as if it were simultaneously the first letter of “another,” interrupted by “whole.”

-WISE

In political and business jargon it is common to append “-wise” to nouns to create novel adverbs: “Revenue-wise, last quarter was a disaster.” Critics of language are united in objecting to this pattern, and it is often used in fiction to satirize less than eloquent speakers.

WOMAN/WOMEN

The singular “woman” probably gets mixed up with the plural “women” because although both are spelled with an O in the first syllable, only the pronunciation of the O really differentiates them. Just remember that this word is treated no differently than “man” (one person) and “men” (more than one person). A woman is a woman—never a women.

WORLD WIDE WEB

“World Wide Web” is a name that needs to be capitalized, like “Internet.” It is made up of Web pages and Web sites (or, less formally, Websites).

WORSE COMES TO WORSE/WORST COMES TO WORST

The traditional idiom is “if worst comes to worst.” The modern variation “worse comes to worst” is a little more logical. “Worse comes to worse” is just a mistake.

WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE/WOULD HAVE LIKED

“She would liked to have had another glass of champagne” should be “she would have liked to have another glass. . . .”

WRECKLESS/RECKLESS

This word has nothing to do with creating the potential for a wreck. Rather it involves not reckoning carefully all the hazards involved in an action. The correct spelling is therefore “reckless.”

WRITTING/WRITING

One of the comments English teachers dread to see on their evaluations is “The professor really helped me improve my writting.” When “-ing” is added to a word which ends in a short vowel followed only by a single consonant, that consonant is normally doubled, but “write” has a silent E on the end to ensure the long I sound in the word. Doubling the T in this case would make the word rhyme with “flitting.”

YA’LL/Y’ALL

“How y’all doin’?” If you are rendering this common Southernism in print, be careful where you place the apostrophe, which stands for the second and third letters in “you.” “Y’all” is properly used only when addressing two or more people.

YE/THE

Those who study the history of English know that the word often misread as “ye” in Middle English is good old “the” spelled with an unfamiliar character called a “eth” which looks vaguely like a “Y” but which is pronounced “TH.” So all those quaint shop names beginning “Ye Olde” whatever are based on a confusion: people never said “ye” to mean “the.” However, if you’d rather be cute than historically accurate, go ahead. Very few people will know any better.

YEA/YEAH/YAY

“Yea” is a very old-fashioned formal way of saying “yes,” used mainly in voting. It’s the opposite of—and rhymes with—“nay.” When you want to write the common casual version of “yes,” the correct spelling is “yeah” (sounds like “yeh”). When the third grade teacher announced

a class trip to the zoo, we all yelled “yay!” (the opposite of “boo”!). That was back when I was only yay big.

YOKE/YOLK

The yellow center of an egg is its yolk. The link that holds two oxen together is a yoke; they are yoked.

YOUR/YOU

“I appreciate your cleaning the toilet” is more formal than “I appreciate you cleaning the toilet.”

YOUR/YOU'RE

“You’re” is always a contraction of “you are.” If you’ve written “you’re,” try substituting “you are.” If it doesn’t work, the word you want is “your.” Your writing will improve if you’re careful about this.

YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THING COMING/YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THINK COMING

Here’s a case in which eagerness to avoid error leads to error. The original expression is the last part of a deliberately ungrammatical joke: “If that’s what you think, you’ve got another think coming.”

NON-ERRORS:

(Those usages people keep telling you are wrong but which are actually standard in English.)

Split infinitives

For the hyper-critical, “to boldly go where no man has gone before” should be “ to go boldly. . . .” It is good to be aware that inserting one or more words between “to” and a verb is not strictly speaking an error, and is often more expressive and graceful than moving the intervening words elsewhere; but so many people are offended by split infinitives that it is better to avoid them except when the alternatives sound strained and awkward.

Ending a sentence with a preposition

A fine example of an artificial “rule” which ignores standard usage. As Winston Churchill said, “This is the sort of pedantry up with which I cannot put.” See “The American Heritage Book of English Usage” at <http://www.bartleby.com/64/C001/050.html>. Jack Lynch has some sensible comments on this issue: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/p.html#prepend>.

The saying attributed to Winston Churchill rejecting the rule against ending a sentence with a preposition must be among the most frequently mutated witticisms ever. I have received many notes from correspondents claiming to know what the “original saying” was, but none of them cites an authoritative source.

The alt.english.usage FAQ states that the story originated with an anecdote in Sir Ernest Gowers’ Plain Words (1948). Supposedly an editor had clumsily rearranged one of Churchill’s sentences to avoid ending it in a preposition, and the Prime Minister, very proud of his style, scribbled this note in reply: “This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.” The American Heritage Book of English Usage agrees.

The FAQ goes on to say that the Oxford Companion to the English Language (no edition cited) states that the original was “This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put.” To me this sounds more likely, and eagerness to avoid the offensive word “bloody” would help to explain the proliferation of variations.

A quick search of the Internet turned up an astonishing number. In this era of copy-and-paste it’s truly unusual to find such rich variety. The narrative context varies too: sometimes the person rebuked by Churchill is a correspondent, a speech editor, a bureaucrat, or an audience member at a speech and sometimes it is a man, sometimes a woman, and sometimes even a young student. Sometimes Churchill writes a note, sometimes he scribbles the note on the corrected manuscript, and often he is said to have spoken the rebuke aloud. The text concerned was variously a book manuscript, a speech, an article, or a government document.

Here is just a sample of the variations circulating on the Net:

1. That is a rule up with which I will not put. 2. This is the kind of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 3. This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 4. Not ending a sentence with a preposition is a bit of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put. 5. That is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put. 6. This is insubordination, up with which I will not put! 7. This is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put. 8. This is the sort of thing up with which I will not put. 9. Please understand that ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I shall not put. 10. Madame, that is a rule up with which I shall not put. One poor soul, unfamiliar with the word “arrant,” came up with: “That is the sort of errant criticism up with which I will not put.”

Then there are those who get it so scrambled it comes out backward:

1. Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put. 2. Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which we will not put. 3. From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put.

I checked the indexes of a dozen Churchill biographies, but none of them had an entry for “prepositions.”

If anyone has a really authoritative citation in a biography or a scholarly article on the subject that nails this down definitively, please write me. Otherwise, please don’t bother. It seems likely that nobody knows for sure what Churchill originally wrote.

Beginning a sentence with a conjunction

It offends those who wish to confine English usage in a logical straitjacket that writers often begin sentences with “and” or “but.” True, one should be aware that many such sentences would be improved by becoming clauses in compound sentences; but there are many effective and traditional uses for beginning sentences thus. One example is the reply to a previous assertion in a dialogue: “But, my dear Watson, the criminal obviously wore expensive boots or he would not have taken such pains to scrape them clean.” Make it a rule to consider whether your conjunction would repose more naturally within the previous sentence or would lose in useful emphasis by being demoted from its position at the head of a new sentence.

Using “between” for only two, “among” for more

The “-tween” in “between” is clearly linked to the number two; but, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, “In all senses, between has, from its earliest appearance, been extended to more than two.” We’re talking about Anglo-Saxon here—early. Pedants have labored to enforce “among” when there are three or more objects under discussion, but largely in vain. Even the pickiest speaker does not naturally say, “A treaty has been negotiated among England, France, and Germany.”

Over vs. more than.

Some people insist that “over” cannot be used to signify “more than,” as in “Over a thousand baton-twirlers marched in the parade.” “Over,” they insist, always refers to something physically higher: say, the blimp hovering over the parade route. This absurd distinction ignores the role metaphor plays in language. If I write 1 on the blackboard and 10 beside it, 10 is still the “higher” number. “Over” has been used in the sense of “more than” for over a thousand years.

Feeling bad

“I feel bad” is standard English, as in “This t-shirt smells bad” (not “badly”). “I feel badly” is an incorrect hyper-correction by people who think they know better than the masses. People who are happy can correctly say they feel good, but if they say they feel well, we know they mean to say they’re healthy.<P>

Forward vs. forwards

Although some style books prefer “forward” and “toward” to “forwards” and “towards,” none of these forms is really incorrect, though the forms without the final “S” are perhaps a smidgen more formal. The spelling “foreword” applies exclusively to the introductory matter in a book.

Gender/sex

Feminists eager to remove references to sexuality from discussions of females and males not involving mating or reproduction revived an older meaning of “gender” which had come to refer in modern times chiefly to language, as a synonym for “sex” in phrases such as “Our goal is to achieve gender equality.” Americans, always nervous about sex, eagerly embraced this usage, which is now standard. In some scholarly fields, “sex” is used to label biologically determined aspects of maleness and femaleness (reproduction, etc.) while “gender” refers to their socially determined aspects (behavior, attitudes, etc.); but in ordinary speech this distinction is not always maintained. It is disingenuous to pretend that people who use “gender” in the new senses are making an error, just as it is disingenuous to maintain that “Ms.” means “manuscript” (that’s “MS”). Nevertheless, I must admit I was startled to discover that the tag on my new trousers describes not only their size and color, but their “gender.”

Using “who” for people, “that” for animals and inanimate objects.

In fact there are many instances in which the most conservative usage is to refer to a person using “that”: “All the politicians that were at the party later denied even knowing the host” is actually somewhat more traditional than the more popular “politicians who.” An aversion to “that” referring to human beings as somehow diminishing their humanity may be praiseworthily sensitive, but it cannot claim the authority of tradition. In some sentences, “that” is clearly preferable to “who”: “She is the only person I know of that prefers whipped cream on her granola.” In the following example, to exchange “that” for “who” would be absurd: “Who was it that said, ‘A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle?’”*

*Commonly attributed to Gloria Steinem, but at least one source says she was quoting Irina Dunn.

“Since” cannot mean “because.”

“Since” need not always refer to time. Since the 14th century, when it was often spelled “syn,” it has also meant “seeing that” or “because.”

Hopefully

This word has meant “it is to be hoped” for a very long time, and those who insist it can only mean “in a hopeful fashion” display more hopefulness than realism.

Momentarily

“The plane will be landing momentarily” says the flight attendant, and the grumpy grammarian in seat 36B thinks to himself, “So we’re going to touch down for just a moment?” Everyone else thinks, “Just a moment now before we land.” Back in the 1920s when this use of “momentarily” was first spreading on both sides of the Atlantic, one might have been accused of misusing the word; but by now it’s listed without comment as one of the standard definitions in most dictionaries.

Lend vs. loan

“Loan me your hat” was just as correct everywhere as “lend me your ears” until the British made “lend” the preferred verb, relegating “loan” to the thing being lent. However, as in so many cases, Americans kept the older pattern, which in its turn has influenced modern British usage so that those insisting that “loan” can only be a noun are in the minority.

Scan vs. skim

Those who insist that “scan” can never be a synonym of “skim” have lost the battle. It is true that the word originally meant “to scrutinize,” but it has now evolved into one of those unfortunate words with two opposite meanings: to examine closely (now rare) and to glance at quickly (much more common). It would be difficult to say which of these two meanings is more prominent in the computer-related usage, to “scan a document.”

Regime vs. regimen

Some people insist that “regime” should be used only in reference to governments, and that people who say they are following a dietary regime should instead use “regimen”; but “regime” has been a synonym of “regimen” for over a century, and is widely accepted in that sense.

Near miss

It is futile to protest that “near miss” should be “near collision.” This expression is a condensed version of something like “a miss that came very near to being a collision,” and is similar to “narrow escape.” Everyone knows what is meant by it and almost everyone uses it. It should be noted that the expression can also be used in the sense of almost succeeding in striking a desired target: “His Cointreau soufflé was a near miss.”

“None” singular vs. plural

Some people insist that since “none” is derived from “no one” it should always be singular: “none of us is having dessert.” However, the earliest form in English is “nan” and “none” is in fact most often treated as a plural. “None of us are having dessert” will do just fine.

Off of

For most Americans, the natural thing to say is “Climb down off of [pronounced ‘offa’] that horse, Tex, with your hands in the air;” but many U.K. authorities urge that the “of” should be omitted as redundant. Where British English reigns you may want to omit the “of” as superfluous, but common usage in the U.S. has rendered “off of” so standard as to generally pass unnoticed there, though some American authorities also discourage it in formal writing. However, “off of” meaning “from” in phrases like “borrow five dollars off of Clarice” is definitely nonstandard.

“Gotten” should be “got.”

In England, the old word “gotten” dropped out of use except in such stock phrases as “ill-gotten” and “gotten up,” but in the U.S. it is still considered interchangeable with “got” as the past participle of “get.”

TIL/UNTIL

Since it looks like an abbreviation for “until,” some people argue that this word should always be spelled “‘til” (though not all insist on the apostrophe). However, “till” has regularly occurred as a spelling of this word for over 800 years and it’s actually older than “until.” It is perfectly good English.

“Teenage” vs. “teenaged”

Some people object that the word should be “teenaged,” but unlike the still nonstandard “ice tea” and “stain glass,” “teenage” is almost universally accepted now.

Don’t use “reference” to mean “cite.”

Nouns are often turned into verbs in English, and “reference” in the sense “to provide references or citations” has become so widespread that it’s generally acceptable, though some teachers and editors still object.

UNQUOTE/ENDQUOTE

Some people get upset at the common pattern by which speakers frame a quotation by saying “quote . . . unquote,” insisting that the latter word should logically be “endquote”; but illogical as it may be, “unquote” has been used in this way for about a century, and “endquote” is nonstandard.

Persuade vs. convince

Some people like to distinguish between these two words by insisting that you persuade people until you have convinced them; but “persuade” as a synonym for “convince” goes back at least to the 16th century. It can mean both to attempt to convince and to succeed. It is no longer common to say things like “I am persuaded that you are an illiterate fool,” but even this usage is not in itself wrong.

“Preventive” is the adjective, “preventative” the noun.

I must say I like the sound of this distinction, but in fact the two are interchangeable as both nouns and adjectives, though many prefer “preventive” as being shorter and simpler. “Preventative” used as an adjective dates back to the 17th century, as does “preventive” as a noun.

People are healthy; vegetables are healthful.

Logic and tradition are on the side of those who make this distinction, but I'm afraid phrases like "part of a healthy breakfast" have become so widespread that they are rarely perceived as erroneous except by the hyper-correct. On a related though slightly different subject, it is interesting to note that in English adjectives connected to sensations in the perceiver of an object or event are often transferred to the object or event itself. In the 19th century it was not uncommon to refer, for instance, to a "grateful shower of rain," and we still say "a gloomy landscape," "a cheerful sight" and "a happy coincidence."

Crops are raised; children are reared.

Old-fashioned writers insist that you raise crops and rear children; but in modern American English children are usually "raised."

Dinner is done; people are finished.

I pronounce this an antiquated distinction rarely observed in modern speech. Nobody really supposes the speaker is saying he or she has been roasted to a turn. In older usage people said, "I have done" to indicate they had completed an action. "I am done" is not really so very different.

"You've got mail" should be "you have mail."

The "have" contracted in phrases like this is merely an auxiliary verb indicating the present perfect tense, not an expression of possession. It is not a redundancy. Compare: "You've sent the mail."

It's "cut the muster," not "cut the mustard."

This etymology seems plausible at first. Its proponents often trace it to the American Civil War. We do have the analogous expression "to pass muster," which probably first suggested this alternative; but although the origins of "cut the mustard" are somewhat obscure, the latter is definitely the form used in all sorts of writing throughout the twentieth century. Common sense would suggest that a person cutting a muster is not someone being selected as fit, but someone eliminating the unfit.

Here is the article on "cut the mustard" from the "faq" (frequently asked questions list) of the UseNet newsgroup alt.usage.english:

This expression meaning "to achieve the required standard" is first recorded in an O. Henry story of 1902: "So I looked around and found a proposition [a woman] that exactly cut the mustard."

It may come from a cowboy expression, "the proper mustard", meaning "the genuine thing", and a resulting use of "mustard" to denote the best of anything. O. Henry in *Cabbages and Kings* (1894) called mustard "the main attraction": "I'm not headlined in the bills, but I'm the mustard in the salad dressing, just the same." Figurative use of "mustard" as a positive superlative dates from 1659 in the phrase "keen as mustard", and use of "cut" to denote rank (as in "a cut above") dates from the 18th century.

Other theories are that it is a corruption of the military phrase "to pass muster" ("muster", from Latin *_monstrare_*="to show", means "to assemble (troops), s for inspection"); that it refers to the practice of adding vinegar to ground-up mustard seed to "cut" the bitter taste; that it literally means "cut mustard" as an example of a difficult task, mustard being a relatively tough crop that grows close to the ground; and that it literally means "cut mustard" as an example of an easy task (via the negative expression "can't even cut the mustard"), mustard being easier to cut at the table than butter.

The more-or-less synonymous expression "cut it" (as in "'Sorry' doesn't cut it") seems to be more recent and may derive from "cut the mustard".

It's "carrot on a stick," not "carrot or stick."

Authoritative dictionaries agree, the original expression refers to offering to reward a stubborn mule or donkey with a carrot or threatening to beat it with a stick and not to a carrot being dangled from a stick.

The Usenet Newsgroup alt.usage.english has debated this expression several times. No one there presented definitive evidence, but dictionaries agree the proper expression is "the carrot or the stick".

One person on the Web mentions an old "Little Rascals" short in which an animal was tempted to forward motion by a carrot dangling from a stick. I think the image is much older than that, going back to old magazine cartoons (certainly older than the animated cartoons referred to by correspondents on alt.usage.english); but I'll bet that the cartoon idea stemmed from loose association with the original phrase "the carrot or the stick" rather than the other way around. An odd variant is the claim broadcast on National Public Radio March 21, 1999 that one Zebediah Smith originated this technique of motivating stubborn animals. This is almost certainly an urban legend.

Note that the people who argue for "carrot on a stick" never cite any documentable early use of the supposed "correct" expression. For the record, here's what the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary has to say on the subject: "carrot, sb. Add: 1. a. fig. [With allusion to the proverbial method of tempting a donkey to move by dangling a carrot before it.] An enticement, a promised or expected reward; freq. contrasted with "stick" (=punishment) as the alternative."

[Skipping references to uses as early as 1895 which refer only to the carrot so don't clear up the issue.]

"1948 Economist 11 Dec. 957/2 The material shrinking of rewards and lightening of penalties, the whittling away of stick and carrot. [Too bad the Economist's writer switched the order in the second part of this example, but the distinction is clear.]

"1954 J. A. C. Brown Social Psychol.of Industry i. 15 The tacit implication that . . .most men . . . are . . . solely motivated by fear or greed (a motive now described as 'the carrot or the stick')

“1963 Listener 21 Feb. 321/2 Once Gomulka had thrown away the stick of collectivization, he was compelled to rely on the carrot of a price system favourable to the peasant.”

The debate has been confused from time to time by imagining one stick from which the carrot is dangled and another kept in reserve as a whip; but I imagine that the original image in the minds of those who developed this expression was a donkey or mule laden with cargo rather than being ridden, with its master alternately holding a carrot in front of the animal’s nose (by hand, not on a stick) and threatening it with a switch. Two sticks are too many to make for a neat expression.

For me, the clincher is that no one actually cites the form of the “original expression.” In what imaginable context would it possibly be witty or memorable to say that someone or something had been motivated by a carrot on a stick? Why not an apple on a stick, or a bag of oats? Boring, right? Not something likely to pass into popular usage.

This saying belongs to the same general family as “you can draw more flies with honey than with vinegar.” It is never used except when such contrast is implied.

This and other popular etymologies fit under the heading aptly called by the English “too clever by half.” People should say a book is titled such-and-such rather than “entitled.”

No less a writer than Chaucer is cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as having used “entitled” in this sense, the very first meaning of the word listed by the OED. It may be a touch pretentious, but it’s not wrong.

“Spitting image” should be “spit and image.”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the earlier form was “spitten image,” which may indeed have evolved from “spit and image.” It’s a crude figure of speech: someone else is enough like you to have been spat out by you, made of the very stuff of your body. In the early 20th century the spelling and pronunciation gradually shifted to the less logical “spitting image,” which is now standard. It’s too late to go back. There is no historical basis for the claim sometimes made that the original expression was “spirit and image.”

“Connoisseur” should be spelled “connaissanceur.”

When we borrowed this word from the French in the 18th century, it was spelled “connoisseur.” Is it our fault the French later decided to shift the spelling of many OI words to the more phonetically accurate AI? Of those Francophone purists who insist we should follow their example I say, let ‘em eat “bifteck.”

OTHER COMMONLY MISPELLED WORDS

Here is a list of some of the most commonly misspelled words in English which I consider not interesting enough to write up as separate entries. These are the correct spellings. Reading over the list probably won’t improve your spelling much, but choosing a few which you find troublesome to write out correctly a few times may.

absence, abundance, accessible, accidentally, acclaim, accommodate, accomplish, accordion, accumulate, achievement, acquaintance, across, address, advertisement, aggravate, alleged, annual, apparent, appearance, argument, atheist, athletics, attendance, auxiliary, balloon, barbecue, barbiturate, bargain, basically, beggar, beginning, believe, biscuit, bouillon, boundary, Britain, business, calendar, camouflage, cantaloupe, cemetery, chagrined, challenge, characteristic, changing, chief, cigarette, climbed, collectible, colonel, colossal, column, coming, committee, commitment, comparative, competent, completely, concede, conceive, condemn, condescend, conscientious, consciousness, consistent, continuous, controlled, coolly, corollary, convenient, correlate, correspondence, counselor, courteous, courtesy, criticize, deceive, defendant, deferred, dependent, descend, description, desirable, despair, desperate, develop, development, difference, dilemma, dining, disappearance, disappoint, disastrous, discipline, disease, dispensable, dissatisfied, dominant, drunkenness, easily, ecstasy, efficiency, eighth, either, eligible, enemy, entirely, equipped, equivalent, especially, exaggerate, exceed, excellence, excellent, exhaust, existence, expense, experience, experiment, explanation, extremely, exuberance, fallacious, fallacy, familiar, fascinate, fictitious, finally, financially, fluorescent, forcibly, foreign, forfeit, formerly, forty, fourth, fulfill, fundamentally, gauge, generally, genius, government, governor, grievous, guarantee, guerrilla, guidance, handkerchief, happily, harass, height, heinous, hemorrhage, heroes, hesitancy, hindrance, hoarse, hoping, humorous, hypocrisy, hypocrite, ideally, idiosyncrasy, ignorance, imaginary, immediately, implement, incidentally, incredible, independence, independent, indicted, indispensable, inevitable, influential, information, inoculate, insurance, intelligence, intercede, interference, interrupt, introduce, irrelevant, irresistible, island, jealousy, judicial, knowledge, laboratory, legitimate, leisure, length, lenient, liaison, license, lieutenant, lightning, likelihood, likely, longitude, loneliness, losing, lovely, luxury, magazine, maintain, maintenance, manageable, maneuver, marriage, mathematics, medicine, millennium, millionaire, miniature, minuscule, minutes, mischievous, missile, misspelled, mortgage, mosquito, mosquitos, murmur, muscle, mysterious, narrative, naturally, necessary, necessity, neighbor, neutron, ninety, ninth, noticeable, nowadays, nuisance, obedience, obstacle, occasion, occasionally, occurred, occurrence, official, omission, omit, omitted, opinion, opponent, opportunity, oppression, optimism, ordinarily, origin, outrageous, overrun, panicky, parallel, parliament, particularly, pavilion, peaceable, peculiar, penetrate, perceive, performance, permanent, permissible, permitted, perseverance, persistence, physical, physician, picnicking, piece, pilgrimage, pitiful, planning, pleasant, portray, possess, possessive, potato, potatoes, practically, prairie, preference, preferred, prejudice, preparation, prescription, prevalent, primitive, privilege, probably, procedure, proceed, professor, prominent, pronounce, pronunciation, propaganda, psychology, publicly, pursue, quandary, quarantine, questionnaire, quizzes, realistically, realize, really, recede, receipt, receive, recognize, recommend, reference, referred, relevant, relieving, religious, remembrance, reminiscence, repetition, representative, resemblance, reservoir, resistance, restaurant, rheumatism, rhythm, rhythmical, roommate, sacrilegious, sacrifice, safety, salary, satellite, scary, scenery, schedule, secede, secretary, seize, sentence, separate, sergeant, several, shepherd, shining, similar, simile, simply, sincerely, skiing, soliloquy, sophomore, souvenir, specifically, specimen, sponsor, spontaneous, statistics, stopped, strategy, strength, strenuous, stubbornness, subordinate, subtle, succeed, success, succession, sufficient, supersede, suppress, surprise, surround, susceptible, suspicious, syllable, symmetrical, synonymous, tangible, technical, technique, temperature, tendency, themselves, theories, therefore, thorough, though, through, till, tomorrow, tournament, tourniquet, transferred, truly, twelfth, tyranny, unanimous, undoubtedly, unnecessary, until, usage, usually, vacuum, valuable, vengeance, vigilant, village, villain, violence, visible, warrant, Wednesday, weird, wherever, wholly, yacht, yield, zoology

MORE ERRORS

People send me quite a few word confusions which don't seem worth writing up but which are nevertheless entertaining or interesting. I simply list a number of these below for your amusement.

What was said

abolishment
acrosst
aerobic numbers
affidavid
all of the sudden
alphabeticalize
altercations
alterior
anchors away
anticlimatic
arm's way
artical
ashfault
assumably
baited breath
barb or bob wire
based around
beckon call
bids well
binded, bounded
blessing in the sky
bored of
bran new
built off of
buttload
by in large or enlarge
Cadillac converter
card shark
cardial infraction
carport tunnel
case and point
cheap at half the price
chalked full
chester drawers
chicken pops
chomp at the bit
circus sized
clarified

What was meant

abolition
across
Arabic numbers
affidavit
all of a sudden
alphabetize
alterations
ulterior
anchors aweigh
anticlimactic
harm's way
article
asphalt
presumably
bated breath
barbed wire
based on
beck and call
bids fair, bodes well
bound
blessing in disguise
bored with
brand new
built on or upon
boatload
by and large
catalytic converter
cardsharp
cardial infarction
carpal tunnel
case in point
cheap at twice the price
chock full
chest of drawers
chicken pox
champ at the bit
circumcised
clarified

cohabit	cohabitate
component	opponent
conservative effort	concerted effort
conversate	converse
copywrite	copyright
copywritten	copyrighted
coronated	crowned
coronet	cornet
cortage	cortege
coup de gras	coup de grace
a couple guys	a couple of guys
cream de mint	creme de menthe
crossified	crucified
culvert sack	cul de sac
cumberbun	cummerbund
deformation of character	defamation of character
deja vous	deja vu
Samuel R. Delaney	Samuel R. Delany
dialate	dilate
diswraught	distraught
doggy dog world	dog-eat-dog world
do to	due to
documentated	documented
down the pipe	down the pike
drownding	drowning
duck tape	duct tape
electorial college	electoral college
escape goat	scapegoat
exasperated	exacerbated
excape	escape
exhilarator	accelerator
ex-patriot	expatriate
expecially	especially
expeculation	speculation
extracting revenge	exacting revenge
exuberant price	exorbitant price
fair to midland	fair to middling
far and few between	few and far between
Federal Drug Administration	Food and Drug Administration
final throws	final throes
first come, first serve	first come, first served
flustrated	frustrated

foilage	foliage
foul swoop	fell swoop
fourty	forty
genuses	genera
gleam	glean
got my dandruff up	got my dander up
harbringer	harbinger
heared	heard
heart-rendering	heart-rending
Heineken remover	Heimlich maneuver
High Iraqi	hierarchy
hobbiest	hobbyist
hold down the fort	hold the fort
howsomever	however
I seen	I saw or I've seen
ice tea	iced tea
imbedded	embedded
impaling doom	impending doom
imput	input
in another words	in other words
in lieu of	in light of
in mass	en masse
in sink	in synch
in tact	intact
incredulous	incredible
insinnuendo	insinuation or innuendo
insuremountable	insurmountable
International Workers of the World (IWW)	Industrial Workers of the World
intragul	integral
Issac	Isaac
ivy tower	ivory tower
jaundra	genre
just assume	just as soon
Klu Klux Klan	Ku Klux Klan
lamblasted, landblasted	lambasted
larnyx	larynx
laxidaisical	lackadaisical
love one and other	love one another
low and behold	lo and behold
masonary	masonry
mean time	meantime
menestrate	menstruate

misconscrew	misconstrue
mitigate against	mitigate against
momento	memento
muriel	mural
new leash on life	new lease on life
neck in neck	neck and neck
nip it in the butt	nip it in the bud
notary republic	notary public
odiferous	odoriferous
oject d'art	objet d'art
once and a while	once in a while
overhauls	overalls
overjealous	overzealous
pacific	specific
pain-staking	painstaking
parody of virtue	paragon of virtue
part in parcel	part and parcel
pastorial	pastoral
patriarticle	patriarchal
peacemeal	piecemeal
pedastool	pedestal
permiscuous	promiscuous
periphial	peripheral
perscription	prescription
Peruvian interest	prurient interest
perverbial	proverbial
poison ivory	poison ivy
portentious	portentous
poultrygeist	poltergeist
pratfall	pitfall
predominately	predominantly
pre-Madonna	prima donna
pervert	pervert
proof is in the pudding	proof of the pudding is in the eating
protagonist	proponent
punkin, pumkin	pumpkin
radical chick	radical chic
radioactive increase	retroactive increase
rebel rouser	rabble rouser
recreate the wheel	reinvent the wheel
repel	rappel
rot iron	wrought iron

seizure salad	Caesar salad
self of steam	self-esteem
sense of false security	false sense of security
should've went	should have gone
shutter to think	shudder to think
simular	similar
skiddish	skittish
slither of cake	sliver of cake
smashed potatoes	mashed potatoes
smoking mirrors	smoke and mirrors
smothered onions	smothered with onions
something or rather	something or other
somulent	somnolent
sorted story	sordid story
stain glass	stained glass
supposably or supposingly	supposedly
supremist	supremacist
techknowledgy	technology
tender hooks	tenterhooks
thankyou	thank you
Theolonius Monk	Thelonious Monk
Tiajuna	Tijuana
tie me over	tide me over
took it for granite	took it for granted
tow the line	toe the line
turpentime	turpentine
tyrannical yolk	tyrannical yoke
unloosen	loosen
unchartered territory	uncharted territory
unthaw	thaw
untracked	on track or off the track
up and Adam	up and at 'em
upgraded	upbraided
Valentimes	Valentines
verbage	verbiage
viadock	viaduct
visa versa	vice versa
vocal chords	vocal cords
voiceterous	boisterous
vulnerable	vulnerable
whelp	welt
Wimbleton	Wimbledon

windshield factor
witch
without further adieu
wolf in cheap clothing
world-renown
worth wild
worse case scenario

wind chill factor
which
without further ado
wolf in sheep's clothing
world-renowned
worth while
worst-case scenario

Commonly Made Suggestions

I am getting a tremendous amount of mail about this site. I enjoy the compliments, try to answer the queries, and ignore the occasional insult (one wit wrote of my site: “I could care less!” Cute.) The volume of correspondence has surpassed my ability to respond to all of it; so please forgive me if you don’t hear back from me. I do read your letters.

I also receive many suggestions for additions. These are usually welcome, and I adopt many of them; but at least half my mail involves points I have already covered in one way or another. If you would be so kind, please go through the following checklist before writing me.

- If your first encounter with my site was through a link to the list of errors, please go to the introductory page at <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/> and read that first. If you are creating a link to my site, please link to that page at <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/>; otherwise users will miss important introductory remarks and fail to trip my counter. The “:8080” string found in some links is obsolete.

- If you think a common error is missing from my list, check it and my to-do list by searching them with the “Find” command in your Web Browser. A surprising number of people don’t know that they can search the text of any Web page with their browsers, but it’s a trick worth learning. What the eye misses, the browser may catch.

- Other places to look: “More Errors,” “Commonly misspelled words,” and “Non-Errors.” If you have a fast connection, try opening and searching the text-only version of the site. This is the most efficient way to use your “find” command to search the whole site at once.

- This is not a general English grammar site, nor am I a grammarian. I am a literature professor interested in English usage, some of which involves grammar. You will find a list of comprehensive English grammar and writing sites at the bottom of my list of errors under “Other Good Resources.” These are the folks to ask for help with your writing. If you have checked thoroughly and still want to write me, please feel free; but be aware that I do not have time to deal with all my correspondence. “Common Errors” is not my main Web project, and I work on it only sporadically (sometimes not for many months at a stretch). To see what other sorts of things I spend my time on, check out my home page at <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/> and the World Civilizations site I manage at <http://www.wsu.edu/~wldciv/>.

- If you believe I have not sent you a response you deserve, consider these possibilities before deciding that I am deliberately not answering you: 1) I may be travelling and not doing e-mail, 2) your return address may be incorrect, causing my replies to you to “bounce” (if you rarely get replies to your e-mails, this is a good possibility), or 3) you are a new AOL user who has erred on the side of caution by blocking all incoming correspondence by people unknown to you.

- Before writing me, check the following list of commonly made suggestions.

You shouldn’t end a sentence with a preposition. Nonsense. See the second item under “Non-Errors.”

You should say “Write to me” rather than “Write me.” Some people following the British tradition object to this usage; it’s standard in the U.S. The expression probably evolved in analogy to expressions like “call me,” “phone me” and “tell me.” In the U.S., “write me” will do just fine in informal writing such as I use on this site.

The word is “pernickety,” not “persnickety.” The original Scottish dialect form was indeed “pernickety,” but Americans changed it to “per-snickety” a century ago, and “pernickety” is generally unknown in the U.S. The Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary calls “pernickety” obsolete; but judging from my correspondence, it’s still widely used across the Atlantic.

Americans have it all wrong, the correct usage is English (Canadian, Australian, etc.). Read my page called “The President’s English.”

A name which ends in an S needs an additional S after the apostrophe when it is made possessive, e.g., “Paul Brians’s Page.” Some styles call for the extra S, some don’t. I was forced by the publisher of my second book to follow this rule and I swore I would never do it again. I think it’s ugly.

Add “ensure/insure.” Look under “assure/ensure/insure.”

Please add [some particularly obscure word]. This site is concerned with common errors in English, not bizarre or esoteric ones, although I often enjoy reading about them. I admit to discussing some not-so-common errors if I find them amusing enough.

What is the correct spelling of _____? Please try a dictionary first. The best on-line one is the WWWebster Dictionary (Merriam Webster)

I was always taught X but all the authorities I’ve looked in say Y. What’s happening to the English language? It’s changing—always has changed, and always will. When you reach the point that nobody seems to agree with your standard of usage any more, you may have simply been left behind. There is no ultimate authority in language—certainly not I—nor any measure of absolute “correctness.” The best guide is the usage of literate and careful speakers and writers, and when they differ among themselves one has to make a choice as to which one prefers. My goal is to keep my readers’ writing and speech from being laughed at or groaned over by average literate people.

How can you possibly approve of _____? Your effrontery in caving in to this ignorant nonsense is appalling [ranting, raving, foaming at the mouth . . .]. It's odd how some people with high standards of correctness seem to have no notion of manners at all. You and I both know that I am not the most conservative of commentators on usage. If you want to make a logical case for a rule I don't accept, please do so politely.

Your list of terms would be easier to read if it were arranged in a bulleted list. Indeed it was when I had it arranged that way; but the list was extremely difficult to navigate because when users returned to it from an individual page they had to scroll up or down a long distance to find where they had left off or wanted to go next. I could arrange the terms in a table, but since I am constantly adding to the list it would create an impossible amount of work for me. The list is now arranged in Netscape columns, but I have resisted inserting breaks after each item to promote compactness. It's a struggle to balance between legibility and navigational ease. If you can't see the columns, you need to upgrade to Netscape 3.0 or later. I have made the list of terms alphabetical to make navigation a bit easier. Note that you can always download and print off the entire site as a single text document to peruse at your leisure. And remember that you can search any Web page, including my list of errors with the "Find" command of your browser.

You should refer your readers to the on-line versions of Strunk and Fowler. Well, I just did, didn't I? But not with enthusiasm. Because of copyright restrictions these are both very early editions (1918 and 1908!). If you're looking for confirmation of your views you may find solace, but the average reader has no way of knowing whether their advice still makes sense today. Would you use a 1908 dictionary to determine the meaning of a word now?

Still want to write? My e-mail address is brians@wsu.edu. Please don't call me "Brian." My name is Paul Brians.

Paul Brians Professor of English Washington State University Pullman, WA 99164-5020

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